

D'ANNUNZIO



GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

D'ANNUNZIO

By TOM ANTONGINI



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INTRODUCTION

OSCAR WILDE has said somewhere that, among the friends of a great man, as among the Apostles, there is always a Judas. It is he who writes his biography.

If the treason, in the eyes of this paradoxical writer, consists solely in possessing the courage to reveal the real life of an exceptional man, to show objectively and sincerely all his virtues and all his faults, then I am quite ready to be considered a Judas and I experience no remorse in the knowledge that I have become one.

I accept, because, like the "man of Karioth," I have spent my life by the Master's side. I have no pangs of conscience because, by unfolding the real life of one of the greatest artists of modern times and by analysing the reflection of his life on his work as a creator and a gallant soldier, I am convinced that I have perpetrated a treason not only useful but indispensable to the complete comprehension of his work and of his actions.

The sources from which I have compiled my book, written during the lifetime of Gabriele D'Annunzio and which I refuse to alter or to modify under any circumstances, are many and varied: thirty full years in common with him; more than seven hundred autographed letters which D'Annunzio has addressed to me in the course of a third of a century and which represent, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, the admission of his hopes, his joys, his disappointments, his dreams, his sorrows and his triumphs; my constant and vigilant observation of the man; the innumerable notes I have jotted down during the years I spent with him.

The reader will then see that chance has placed me in that privileged situation to which D'Annunzio himself alludes in his Introduction to the *Life of Cola di Rienzo*, when he declares: "*The ideal condition for the work of the biographer is for him to have been the attentive and assiduous witness of the life which he desires to depict.*"

Well—I have been that witness.

* * * * *

INTRODUCTION

In my book, I have not followed the example of those who, in describing the life of Gabriele D'Annunzio, have deemed it indispensable to assume the timorous and reverent attitude of the rhapsodists who formerly sang the praises and described the doughty deeds of sultans and of despots in their presence, nor have I copied those so-called biographers who, knowing D'Annunzio only from his photographs and anecdotes, have felt that they were serving humanity by putting between the covers of a book everything that has been said about him for more than fifty years.

I have, on the contrary, examined carefully and in every imaginable aspect *the man* facing the most varied problems which came his way.

That is why I am convinced that I am the first to lift the veil which covers this mysterious personality. It is a veil both tawdry and unbecoming and it is very suggestive of the one in the Basilica of Saint Peter, which covers to this very day the immortal nudity of Giulia Farnese.

* * * * *

In 1934, Gabriele D'Annunzio, who has never failed to present me with copies of his books, gave me the second volume of *Faville del Maglio* (*Sparks from the Hammer*).

Before awaiting a dedication, he raised his eyes and looked at me fixedly for an instant.

Did he recognise in me the impartial observer of his acts, which have many times moved me to the point of tears and of which at other times I have dared to disapprove? Did his intuition tell him that I was busily engaged in amassing my memoirs of his life and did he want to authenticate them in advance?

I cannot say.

Whatever the cause, he looked at the book, which was open on the table before him, and, without hesitating, he wrote:

"To Tom Antongini, who, during so many years, has been for me the companion with the attentive and penetrating eyes.

"Gabriele D'Annunzio."

And, as he handed the volume to me, his face wore an indefinable smile.

TOM ANTONGINI.

CHAPTER I

THE PHYSICAL MAN

"Savage modesty"—Mens sana in corpore sano—*My highly polished cranium*—A Prime Minister's gentle thought—The Poet as a porter—A Poet carved out of old ivory—The ignoble fly—*Water is superlative*—Gourmet or gourmand, or both?—Samuel Goldwyn's nose—The strychnine fiend—The *tepid broth* brain—Three Genoese gentlemen—Acqua Nuntia—D'Annunzio as a virgin—The mask of Immortality—Portraits of the Poet.

THE first chapter of this Book of Memoirs, which may be accused of boldness but never of untruthfulness, is far more difficult to write than any that follow, for I desire, at the outset, to give my readers a clear idea of the man D'Annunzio, complete with his personal habits.

I am immediately confronted with this obstacle: whereas it is comparatively simple for anyone who lives in proximity to the Poet and who knows him intimately to divine a thought which he would prefer to conceal, to note his fleeting impressions or even to detect a like or dislike which he wishes to hide behind a veil of indifference, it is, on the other hand, no easy task to penetrate his physical defence. In this respect, the famous Poet is extraordinarily reserved and, to use his own words, of a *"savage modesty."*

He has never indulged in tennis, running or, indeed, in any form of athletics save those exercises adapted especially for his health and to suit his particular mode of living. Consequently, he has never been accustomed to the casual semi-nudity to be found in the dressing-rooms of clubs. He dislikes intensely to be seen unless fully dressed, and it is a positive effort for him to receive a friend on an important mission when he is in one of those tight-fitting garments which music-hall artists have made so popular with their audiences. Apart from his valet and an occasional masseur no one enters his bath-room when he is making his ablutions.

In the course of my long years of daily contact with D'Annunzio

I have perhaps seen him nude three or four times. But, when I had the opportunity, if I failed to view him with the physician's eye, at least I scrutinised him as thoroughly as the Colonel (who presides over a medical board) would a recruit. More fortunate, then, than Tacitus and Suetonius, who, to describe the intimate lives of their Emperors, were forced to rely on the gossip of freedmen and slaves, I am in a position to present the Poet to my readers *in puris naturalibus*.

The only official description of D'Annunzio concerning his physical as well as his moral attributes is the one dated the 31st August, 1909, which was issued by the Mayor of Pescara at the request of the Judicial Authorities of Siena, following a summons issued against the Poet for exceeding the speed limit. It reads: "Gabriele D'Annunzio, son of Francesco and Luisa Benedictis, was born in Pescara on the 12th March, 1863; he is united by legal ties to Hardouin Maria, from whom he lives separated; he has four sons; he is an author; he performed his military service from the 1st November, 1889, to the 4th October, 1890; he is without private means. His conduct is good; he has fair hair and blue eyes."

The Mayor generously credited D'Annunzio with one more legitimate son than he possesses. The illegitimate offspring, if any, is no concern of the Mayor's.

The "author with the blue eyes and no means" failed to appear in court, preferring to remain in his Villa Capponcina at Fiesole, where he was working on a novel "with that wise leisureliness"—to quote a French newspaper—"which is attractive to the writer but repulsive to the motorist."

Gabriele D'Annunzio weighs about twelve and a half stone; stands five feet six inches; measures thirty-six inches around the chest and twenty-one and a half about the head. His right shoulder is perceptibly lower than his left. This appears to be rather the result of a habitual position than of a deformity. The Poet, himself, attributes it to his method of sitting at his desk.

As he writes, he holds the paper firmly with his left hand, and permits his right elbow to fall well below the edge of the table. I must remark, however, that his eldest son, Mario, has the same stooping shoulder, although in all his life he has

certainly not written as much as his father produces in one inspired week.

Until recent years D'Annunzio's skin was smooth and white—an almost waxy white. His whole body was free from scars or blemishes. He has slender knees and ankles and a sinewy, well-shaped calf. His foot is very small, his waist is narrow and his abdomen flat.

In his fifty-eighth year D'Annunzio's body had the resilience, the firmness and the bulging muscles of a man of thirty, and there was no sign of age or decay. It was still that virile body of his adolescence which, he tells us, was such a source of satisfaction to his father that "*he used to pass his hand over the muscles of my arms which were hardened by vaulting horses and parallel bars; over my shoulders, my thorax, my ribs——*"

I should add that the Poet, constantly bearing in mind the maxim "*Mens sana in corpore sano*," has always taken the greatest care of his body. In a letter which he wrote to me at Bordeaux from Arcachon in 1911 he says: "*I enclose a list of books which I want you to borrow from the library and another list of those to buy. Also, please see if you can find a pair of dumb-bells, weighing from six to ten pounds.*"

His hands are small and delicately proportioned. They are rather the manicured hands of a great prelate than the hands of a poet. They are so sensitive that he cannot abide vigorous hand-shaking and is apt to curse loudly if an admirer clasps his hand with enthusiasm. "*My eleven-year-old hand*," he has written, "*free and flexible, sure and strong, well-made and supple*"—a perfect description, save that he neglects to mention the sensitiveness. Referring to a callosity on one of his fingers, he says: "*It is deformed by continuous use of the pen.*" And: "*On the back of my left thumb I have borne from childhood the sign of my innate pride.*" He would have done well to substitute "obstinacy" for "pride."

He attributed his premature baldness to the immoderate use of an ointment, containing coal-tar, with which a doctor treated a scalp wound received in a duel. Similarly, he ascribes the small white spots on his nails (and in this he is faithful to a popular belief of the Abruzzi) to the lies he has told women in the course of his amorous career. I am afraid the

nails would be entirely white if this belief were founded.

His skull is of the truly dolichocephalic type. There is a fringe of chestnut hair about the smooth and shining dome which has been exposed to the elements since his forty-fifth year. He replied to a French lady who asked him a rather personal question on the matter: "*Madame, future beauty will be bald.*" In a letter to the famous Italian actress, Emma Grammatica, he speaks of "*my superhuman cranium.*" He is proud of this peculiarity, and, with no tinge of irony, he writes in one of his books: "*A greyhound or a well-trained racehorse—the legs of Ida Rubinstein, the body of an Ardito fording the Piave, the form and structure of my highly polished cranium—these are the most beautiful phenomena in the world.*" But he is always ready to joke about it. Once, when my daughter wrote to him and recommended that, to cure a cold, he should rub his head with a woollen cloth before going to bed, he wired her a few days later: "*I am cured, but, thanks to your super-miracle, my dome is covered with ridiculously erect hair. The old laurel crowns are no longer useful. Send me one of painted zinc fifty-three centimetres in diameter.*"

Over the left eyebrow there is a small scar which has become almost invisible. It has a loftier origin than that on his thumb, for he owes it to a piece of cement which fell from the ceiling in the *Comandante's* room in the Government Palace at Fiume on the day when, by order of Cavaliere Giolitti, President of the Council, a shot was fired from the cruiser *Andrea Doria*. That shot was intended to cut short the sacred life of Gabriele D'Annunzio and, at the same time, to overcome the resistance of the *Holocaust City*. It was a gentle and patriotic thought, and shows the mentality of the Minister of the little Italy of the period.

The Poet is extremely near-sighted, and is forced, when working, to wear a monocle or spectacles. All his life he has had considerable trouble with his eyes. He wrote years ago to his friend Scarfoglio: "*My eyes often tire me, and my consequent fatigue prevents me from attending to them.*" He was little more than twenty at the time. Even before he lost the sight of his left eye, the expression on his face, when he mislaid his "*sweetmeat*," as he called his monocle, was really touching, although his fine

philosophy never deserted him. One day, this catastrophe occurred as we arrived alone and at night at Lucerne, in the course of a mysterious journey which I shall mention elsewhere. "*Let me carry your bag,*" he said, quite naturally, "*for without my monocle I am good for nothing else.*"

D'Annunzio's eyes are of a nondescript colour—a greyish hazel, if you will—and their extreme activity reveals the man's insatiable curiosity. The sight of the left eye was lost as the result of a serious flying accident during the war, and the sublime pages of the *Notturmo* immortalise the tedious and painful treatment to which the Poet was for so long subjected. And ever since he has been obliged to take great care to preserve the use of the remaining eye. When he had passed an evening looking at films I had brought to him at the Vittoriale, he wrote to me: "*As a penance for having transgressed the Rule in the forgetfulness engendered by the renewal of the pleasure of friendship, I spent a sleepless night. Moreover, the retina, badly healed, has now become a photographic plate of supreme sensitiveness.*"

Although the Poet's teeth are far from perfect, his smile is both charming and expressive.

As a compensation for his other physical defects, he is gifted with exceptional hearing. "*My ear,*" he remarked, "*splits noises into their component parts, as, for instance, the sound of water running between smooth surfaces. It is so sensitive, this ear of mine, that it alarms me. Once I sat next to Toscaninni when he was conducting a rehearsal and, to his amazement, I informed him that one of the instruments was slightly out of tune.*" Talking to a friend at the Vittoriale of the joy he derived from his adored olive-trees on the shores of the Lago di Garda, he said: "*A short time ago I heard melodious arpeggios sighing amongst these silver leaves; every thin thread of running water was like the sonorous chord of a harp——*"

D'Annunzio's nose is rather fleshy and slightly pointed at the tip. At the time to which I am referring, the hairs of his moustache, like those of an inhabitant of the Celestial Empire, had dwindled to about forty, which he clipped short. His chin was ornamented by a small pointed beard. The skin of his face, wizened by premature wrinkles, was of a waxy colour with a yellowish tinge. This led an American lady, during a rehearsal

of *Saint-Sébastien* at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, to remark to the Poet, after having scrutinised him through her lorgnettes like a prize exhibit: "You look, *Maître*, as though you were carved out of old ivory!" He smiled, but was anything but flattered, for he was scarcely fifty at the time.

His voice is harmonious and limpid, and his diction is perfect; he scans his words so that no syllable is ever lost to his listeners and never raises his voice except when making a speech.

He has always been able to demand a great deal of his body, which he has never failed to nourish abundantly. He has ever refused to acknowledge fatigue, grave illnesses and the common infirmities which afflict nine-tenths of us, and if, at times, he complains, it is not because of an imperfection or a weakness of his organism, but because anything but perfectly balanced conditions irritates him no end.

At fifty-seven he was still riding horses, swimming and dancing. When Leon Koschnitzky saw him for the first time in Fiume, he wrote: "Three fanfares of trumpets. Here is the author of *Laudi* in puttees and spurs, his chest encased in the tight jacket of the *Arditi*. What a pace he sets! What vivacity in his glance! He is of the age of his soldiers. He is a mere twenty as are they——"

In a message which he sent to Iti Bacci in Fiume in 1931, in connection with the nautical competitions on the Lago di Garda, he wrote: "*Why was I not with the 'Transatlantics'? Why was I not with the fastest and strongest boat in the race? Have you forgotten my stamina in Fiume and my speed as a pedestrian?*"

He has always been a hearty eater. Dr. Murri said to him in Fiume: "You say you are abstemious, but even the most abstemious man eats ten times more than is necessary." And we have from D'Annunzio himself a description of the huge meals he consumed when he was twenty after a gallop in the Campagna: "*What a formidable appetite was mine! Give me back those days of dry, stinging air! Mine was a real hunger, one of those hungers which do not require stimulating sauces or heady wines, but demand succulent food. I had a dinner—all game: game à point, game from the woods, game from the marshes, game all skins, game all feathers . . . I partook of hare, fragrant with thyme and rosemary, straight*

from the spoil of the summer shoot. It was a fat hare, a well-nourished hare, a perfect hare . . . Then I had 'pâté,' golden in its rich and lovely crust, dressed with small slices of bacon and filled with a glacé juice, transparent as glass, which held in its cool embrace odorous truffles, red liver, and scraps of soft partridge, and oh! what skilful carving! After that I devoured slices of some unknown delicacy, lying on a bed of shredded mushrooms, dripping with butter with the taste of nuts, bathing in a champagne sauce. . . . And then a pheasant which, having hung a week, had acquired the aroma of an exquisite oil, slightly fermented. This proved a delicious titbit, saturated with a juice of ox-marrow, sprinkled over with morsels of truffles and surmounted by large truffles sliced in two—what delight! May the sin of gluttony be forgiven me! How sad and bad and mad it is, but oh! how sweet it is!"

Gourmet or gourmand—or both? My readers must decide, and here is another little example from which to judge. After a sumptuous repast in a restaurant in Vienna, he jotted down these notes: "*Choice food induces mental harmony. Snipe—magnificent colouring—the golden tawny essence in the silver vessel—the pretty croûtons—the delicate and complicated flavours—the 'Marcobrunner' in the slender glasses—a wine of ardent gold—*"

No matter—D'Annunzio is ever the Poet!

He has always awaited the hour for luncheon and dinner with joyous anticipation, and his temper suffers when he is not served on the minute of the hour. He is extremely fastidious in the matter of food: a mere nothing can ruin his appetite. Riccardo Sonzogno, who messed with the Poet when they were doing their military service, would catch a fly and go through the motions of eating it for the benefit of his sensitive comrade, but D'Annunzio, sickened at the thought, would leave the table, thus enabling Sonzogno to consume two meals instead of one.

In later years at the Vittoriale he asserts that he partakes of but a light collation once in twenty-four hours, and that he works from ten at night until the "*hour of the dew.*" In reality, the following were the hours of his meals and of his work in the years from 1924 to 1932. He retired to his study towards midnight, and there apples, English biscuits and milk were waiting

for him. He worked until three or four in the morning, went to bed and slept until noon. Except on very rare occasions he lunched alone. Only after his lunch did he dress and wander about until four or five in the afternoon, when he had tea or coffee with milk and bread and butter. He then gave any necessary orders, went out for a stroll in the garden, read sometimes, and glanced at the newspapers. Thus he passed the time until nine in the evening, when he dined abundantly.

Because of his habit of turning night into day and of forgetting that the whole world does not do as he does, friends at Gardone or near at hand were liable to be awakened at dawn by one of D'Annunzio's servants bringing flowers or an invitation to dinner.

One day his physician, Dr. Duse, recommended that he should abandon his cloistered existence, take more exercise and go out more in society. D'Annunzio, who was in no mood to conform to such a regime, replied: "*For ten years prior to her death, one of my sisters never left her house, and never did she have a thing the matter with her. Do you understand?*" Dr. Duse understood.

He has never been a real drinker of wine except during his stay near the "*vinous city*," as he calls Bordeaux. There, the famous wine-growers convinced him of the enormous advantages to the health of a glass or two of *Château Lafitte* or *Château Yquem*. "*On a certain day, when I was burdened with feverish and continually interrupted labour,*" he told his friend, Marcel Boulanger, "*in that exasperating Arcachon, I fell victim to a profound melancholy. I sent for a doctor, celebrated in those parts, and I said: 'Doctor, I feel sad, I am nauseated, I suffer from giddiness and, at night, I converse with incubuses.' He examined me gravely and slowly, and finally decided to give me a prescription. This is what he wrote: 'Mouton Rothschild, 1895.'*"

But after Fiume the Poet gave up wine almost entirely, declaring that it produced acidity of the stomach. The truth of the matter is that he never really enjoyed wine. On the other hand, he adores water and often proclaims its virtues. On the walls of his bath at the Vittoriale, the motto "*Water is superlative*" is stencilled in a hundred places. At the inauguration of an aqueduct in the Province of Trento, where, along with the

Bishop Prince of Trento, he was present at the banquet, he said to the illustrious Prelate that he was disinclined to sip of wine when they had come to render homage to water. When he runs short of mineral water, he considers it a calamity, and he wrote me from his villa at Arcachon to the near-by hotel where I was staying: "*Yesterday I was without water, and I did not discover it until the inn had closed ! ! !*" The four exclamation points are his.

He has a passion for fruit, and he eats it in all its forms at every meal and between meals. In his *Faville di Maglio* (*Sparks from the Hammer*) we find the line: "*The almost rabid urge to offer to my fame, a basket of freshly gathered fruit.*" His preference is for nectarines, grapes, mandarines, bananas and strawberries. For the latter he has a perfect craving. In 1921 I sent him some of the huge Milan variety, and he wrote me at once: "*I have received the magic case from which emerged the unexpected miracle of strawberries resembling the rubicund noses of transatlantic millionaires.*" And when I procured him some bananas at a time when their importation was forbidden he wired to me: "*Last evening in my sick-bed I was wishing for the banana without the song, and this morning there arrived magically the rarest of all fruits. Am writing to you.—Gabriele.*" He has always favoured a *macédoine* composed of minute slices of orange with a few drops of a liqueur. He insists that this mixture is of his own invention, although he knows as well as I do that there is not a word of truth in the contention. He enjoys rice, grilled meats and every kind of fish, and is particularly fond of sweets, such as sugared almonds and *marrons glacés*. He has a mania for ices and, if he is unobserved, is capable of swallowing ten or twelve in rapid succession. It has been reported that, *during his first stay in Rome*, he ordered lemon ices and caviar served together, but I am certain that he can only have done so for the pleasure of watching the expression of those about him.

He has always been a very moderate drinker of tea and coffee. He is convinced that the China tea consumed by Europeans has already been used in China to sweep the carpets of the glass factories, and that, having been dried, it is sent to Europe, where the palates, devoid of taste, delight in it.

He smokes very little, and then, only the mildest of cigarettes. He was fifty-two when he began. At the outbreak of the war he was in Paris, and was obliged to queue up, like any ordinary mortal, to obtain passports and identity cards. He admitted that smoking made waiting almost bearable. He likes to say that smoking is not a pleasure until it becomes a vice. "*I have tried three times to smoke a pipe,*" he told me once, "*and three times I have been punished. The first was at Pescara. I had noticed such satisfaction on the faces of the fishermen when they were smoking that I rushed to the house of one of my father's friends, filled a pipe I found there, and drew a few timid puffs. I was certain that my last day had come!—My second attempt was at Naples. The 'Lady Clara,' a small yacht of mine, was lying in the harbour. To impress some friends whom I had invited on a short cruise, I met them in the hall of the Hôtel Vesuvio with a pipe in my mouth, for all the world like a real Englishman. It was not the fault of the expensive pipe nor of the choice tobacco I had purchased, but it seems that I was as green as a blade of grass when they arrived. I was obliged to go to bed. I was horribly ill, and the cruise had to be postponed.—The third and the last time was here at the Vittoriale. I received a present of a German pipe, and I determined to see if its nationality made any difference. The result of my experiment was too horrible for words.*"

* * * * *

Apart from malaria, which struck him down in 1890 in Faenza, D'Annunzio has never suffered any graver illnesses than tooth-aches and colds, but when he is attacked by one or the other of these, he considers himself as pitiable as the leper in the Bible, and, like the leper, he retires into voluntary and rigorous seclusion, arming himself with holy patience and some fifty handkerchiefs. His colds are usually complicated by sore throats, which he glorifies with the pompous name of "laryngitis." His form of "laryngitis" has often served him as a convenient and frequently mendacious excuse for avoiding inopportune visits, tedious journeys, celebrations, speech-making, inaugurations and public functions—in a word, all the social, political, patriotic, religious and amorous obligations with which humanity is burdened. For instance, from the Government

Palace in Fiume, he wrote to ask me to convey apologies to Achille Richard, who was expecting letters of introduction for Paris: "*With the many things I must attend to and my incipient cold I am unable to prepare the two letters for friend Richard. The cold is in my head and most annoying.*" And again: "*In a few days I shall feel less oppressed, but for the moment I am desperately affected, and I spend all my time attending to my nose, which the war refused to shatter.*" And still again: "*A vile autumn cold impedes my every effort. Kindly warn all those who chafe at the delay.*"

In 1913 he wrote: "*Dear Tom, I fear I failed to explain clearly, but if you will go to-day to Bellot and excuse me on account of my illness you will be rendering me a great service. This is simply a reminder. Shall see you later.—Your Gabriele.*"

In 1914 I received this: "*Dear Tom, As I am being continuously annoyed by telephone calls and invitations, and as I must have absolute quiet if I am to recuperate, it would be a good idea if, through some newspaper, you circulated the report that I sprained my knee playing 'Hooker' in the garden of our Embassy and that I am laid up and in need of several days' rest. This, at least, is a useful 'item' after so many stupidities.*"

In later years he has replaced his imaginary "laryngitis" with vague allusions to his general physical condition, coupled with a small present for the person who is being put off. For example: "*To X, a small sample of the goldsmith's art by Maestro Paragon Cappella, with regards and regrets from the very old Gabriele D'Annunzio.*"

A police magistrate, postponing the hearing of a charge against the Poet for breaking the speed limit, wrote: "Because of the usual laryngitis of Gabriele D'Annunzio——"

A few days after D'Annunzio had written to me: "*I have an obstinate cold which reduces my brain to a tepid broth,*" Doderet, his French translator, lifted his arms to Heaven and protested: "It is sad that the brain of a genius should be blown away on a handkerchief."

D'Annunzio is a whole-hearted supporter of all medicines. He attributes to them curative powers which surpass the wildest dreams of the manufacturer in the "fine frenzy" of an advertising campaign. It is more than a hobby: it is a passion with him to

discover new remedies, and he is a marvellous propagandist. He has the faith of a disciple in all patent medicines, particularly when he finds the labels in good taste, and has never refused to try a new potion, even when it claims to cure a complaint which is unknown to him. When he follows a plan, he does so with the application and industry of a prize pupil. His love for medicines has nothing to do with the state of his health; he will take a dose of anything at any time, and he withstands admirably the effects of the most dangerous poisons. He has a special weakness for everything containing strychnine or iodine and has consumed as many as ten milligrammes of strychnine in a day, with the result that, while he was at Venice during the war, he showed symptoms of tetanus. And even this did not prevent him from continuing to use it.

He enjoys injections of all sorts and his ingenuity regarding them is prodigious. At three o'clock one morning he wrote a note to Dr. Duse: "*I am sad and ill. Bring me the remedy at once.*" The doctor pretended to find this request quite natural, and arriving at the Vittoriale, he injected a soothing but wholly innocuous drug which had the effect on the Poet of a formidable dose of morphine, purely because he believed in it. One day, returning from an excursion on the Lago di Garda in his *Mas* (the *Mas* of Buccari), he called the doctor to ask him if the exposure to wind and rain was dangerous for his health. The doctor replied: "You have such a superb physique that, the worse the weather, the better you are." This so enchanted the Poet that he wrote and wired the verdict to half the universe.

Although he can endure the bitterest cold weather, he keeps his home stifflingly hot all the year round, with the possible exception of two months in the summer. In February, 1922, he wrote me from the Vittoriale: "*The heat in this house has unsettled all the timbers, and bits of mortar have been falling unexpectedly on the heads of the peaceful inhabitants.*" But for a little inconvenience such as that he would never have consented to reduce the temperature. He often employs this infernal heat to shorten the visits of unwelcome admirers.

In 1920 three robust and florid Genoese gentlemen came to the Vittoriale to render homage to the Poet. The Poet told me, in advance, that he desired the interview to be as brief as possible.

To ensure that it would *be*, he resorted to his infallible stratagem. Two hours before the time of the appointed rendezvous, he gave orders that the huge stove in the reception-room should be heated to the limit of its capacity. When the "ambassadors" of Genoa arrived, I informed them that the *Comandante* would receive them shortly. By the horrified expressions on their faces I judged that they were thinking: "But we'll die here. This must be a practical joke." Poor devils! At last the Poet deigned to put in an appearance, but after ten minutes, two of the visitors were unable to speak coherently, and perspiration was streaming down their faces like water through a burst dam. The third was dreamily articulate. His face was purple. They profited by a short pause in the conversation to mutter excuses and to depart precipitately. D'Annunzio, finding the temperature quite comfortable and forgetting his own Machiavellian machinations, asked me: "*Why on earth did they rush off in such a hurry?*"

D'Annunzio is most particular about his personal appearance. I think that, had he nothing better to do, he would be entirely happy bathing, dressing and spraying himself with perfume from morning until night. During the war, when baths were at a premium, he wrote me to Venice, in 1915: "*Dear Tom, Back from the Front for a few hours. I return on Monday. I have come solely to bathe and to talk to you.*" And a few months later, from the Front, he wrote: "*I have accustomed myself to the impossible: I go five days without a change of clothes, without so much as washing my face.*" He uses, on an average, a pint of "Eau de Coty" daily, and a perfume bottle of ordinary size may last only five or six days. In his youth his taste ran to "Crab-Apple"; at the time of the Villa Capponcina it was "Acqua Nuntia," of which I shall have occasion to speak elsewhere. "Mousse de Diane," Atkinson's "Virelle," "Chypre," "Borgia" and "Toute la Fôret" have all, at various periods, been his favourite perfumes. At the Vittoriale he favours "Peau d'Espagne," prepared specially by the Maison Coty.

He changes his shirts so frequently that his servants are as likely as not only to refresh them with an iron and replace them with the tiers of others.

Legend, which has played so extravagantly with all the incidents of the Poet's life, has fallen short in regard to his

wardrobe. Certainly no one, unless the Chevalier d'Orsay, has ever squandered such quantities of money on clothes of all descriptions. I do not exaggerate when I say that he could always count a hundred suits of one sort or another, with the exception of the period of his youth, when he considered a black jacket and a white satin tie the acme of elegance. For thirty years his favourite tailor was a Lombard, Prandoni of Milan, who never sent a bill and refused proffered payment when he learned that the Poet was financially embarrassed.

To my certain knowledge, D'Annunzio, who seldom wears a jewel himself, has presented precious stones and metals of a value of more than half a million lire to friends of both sexes. For years he personally possessed but three cabochon emeralds of varying sizes, and he rarely wore more than one. For a long time he wore only the plain gold band which had once belonged to Lord Byron, and which was presented to him by a descendant of the celebrated English poet. For his evening shirts he kept two small pearls, one white and one black, both perfect in shape and colour. I bought them for him at Tecla's. In addition he has several gold cigarettes cases, a few pairs of cuff-links and a dressing-case fitted with ivory, inlaid with gold monograms. These last valuables are his favourites, and it is something of a rite to spread them out on a bedroom table wherever he arrives, a green damask cloth being provided for the purpose. This, however, is only attended to when the bed has been turned down and the sheets examined.

The Poet has always trimmed his beard and his moustache himself, and, for this operation, employs a collection of large and small scissors. His fringe of hair is cut by a barber every fortnight. At Fiume, Italo Rossignoli, one of his most famous servants, gathered up these rare snips with a devotion worthy of a Lady Beaconsfield. I surprised him one day when he was arranging them in small packets. "I save them for his admirers," he informed me. "Are they in great demand?" I inquired. "Women, as you know, are mad," was his reply. "Do they fetch a good price?" "Captain, the 'parts' of Gabriele D'Annunzio's body have no price."

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I remember, a little sadly, the description of the Poet, given in the year of grace, 1883, by Leone Fortis, writing under the pseudonym of "Doctor Veritas": "Gabriele D'Annunzio is a slight man, gentle and graceful, soft-voiced, with chestnut locks, smoothed and scented with unguents, falling lightly over a forehead as smooth and white as that of a small angel in a Church procession." (What a marvellous business in packets of hair a valet could have done in those days!) "He has the beardless velvety cheeks of a virgin. He speaks neatly, gracefully, with a certain anxiety to please, with an affectation of easy abandon, with a mixture of artificiality proper to one who contemplates himself with complacency and enjoys listening to his own words."

D'Annunzio has always had a passion for youth, and his greatest regret in life is to have lost it. His favourite goddess is Hebe. "*Do not forget,*" he said one day when speaking from a balcony in an ancient Italian city which had just given him its freedom, "*that at Mytilene, on the field of one of the holiest battles ever fought by free men, the rallying cry was 'Hebe,' the divine child whom Hera conceived by inhaling the perfume of a rose.*" And at Fiume he said: "*Fate has named me Prince of Youth until the end of my life.*" When an editor of the *Tribuna* asked him, in 1909, if he desired to live to a ripe old age, he replied: "*Can you imagine an old D'Annunzio who would no longer work as I work, and ride as I ride, who would no longer love life as I love it, as I have always loved it?*" And in 1932 he wrote to the Sailing Club of his native town: "*My daily will-power does not know a single moment of relaxation, but, alas! my youth seems nevertheless to be leaving my body, drop by drop, as cold water used to drip from it years ago when I boarded a fishing craft by swarming up a knotted rope thrown overside.*" And having accompanied my daughter Nerina, then seventeen, and myself to see the Ufa film *Siegfried*, he wrote me to the hotel the following day: "*All the fantastic visions peopled the room of the 'Prison' and, above them all, hovered regret for 'divine youth,' evoked by the presence of Nerina and the summoning of Siegfried. Morosa senectus.*"

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D'Annunzio has an exact appreciation of his own physique and he writes of it with precision and wit. He deplores that his face has aged, whereas his body has remained surprisingly young and agile, and says:

"I have just received the photograph which was taken yesterday. It is ruthless, for it shows me as I am and my face just as it is. Nevertheless, whilst riding to-day, I experienced inexplicably youthful sensations.

"That is the worst of it! In yesterday's pitiless picture I am already old. I see it: there is something senile there. It is very strange because I do not feel it. When I walk, when I gallop, when I am flying, when I am soaked in air, when the wind whistles in my ears I have a queer feeling that my face is firm and smooth as in the days of my youth, when, in reality, it is the wrinkled face of a little grumbling old man.

"Nevertheless, at the stables a little while ago, I leaped from the saddle with the lightness of an acrobat and landed on my feet with the neat, clean balance that only elastic muscles will permit.

"Self-discipline can preserve youth of action, but passion and age, paired under the same yoke, plough the face."

Self-knowledge has not prevented the Poet from regretting, all his life, that fate did not present him with the body and the face of a Foscolo, a Shelley or a de Musset. No amount of glory, no triumph over a woman on the field of love has ever sufficed to repay him for this æsthetic flaw. He has ever striven vainly to hide his physique from the eyes of the public. Had he been ugly like Beethoven, hideous like Socrates or repugnant like Verlaine, he would have resigned himself to his destiny and would have extracted advantages from his very misfortune. Unfortunately, Fate, which gave to D'Annunzio untold genius, an iron constitution and incredible luck, conferred upon him a useful but unimpressive body and a face of no particular character. Physically he neither repels nor attracts, for in his appearance there is nothing heroic, nothing savage, nothing strange, nothing to awaken aversion or desire—in a word, nothing special. Had he not been marked for his deeds, he would have passed along the sidewalks of life unnoticed. No woman would have turned to gaze at him and most men would have ignored his existence.

Early conscious of his lack of striking personality, D'Annunzio had recourse to ornament, and he sought, by his dress and by his graceful carriage, to create for himself what the French call so aptly and so untranslatably a *genre*. By assuming studied mannerisms, he finally achieved what he did not seek and what he did not himself approve of: an appearance of exaggeration and artificiality, for his pose was, and is, undeniably deliberate.

The physical aspect which he has, so to speak, constructed has passed through two distinct phases. In the pre-war phase, the Poet endeavoured to be the reigning champion of æstheticism, and, in consequence, cultivated an excessive refinement, indulging in attitudes and gestures so affected as to be perilously near effeminacy. He carried to absurd extremes the cults of luxury, elegance and comfort, and openly declared his contempt for all exhibitions of brute force. D'Annunzio lived in this phase from the age of twenty to forty. He was the perfect dandy. He would not hear of wearing anything which was not imported, and he would not use a perfume which was not outrageously expensive. His requirements were those of a Beau Brummell. But his reincarnation of this famous dandy was relentlessly frustrated by his physique and by his persistently provincial taste. During this entire period, he continuously exposed himself to ridicule by his lack of restraint in bearing and in dress. In the second phase, during and just after the war, though his fastidiousness in dress remained unchanged, it was for an utterly different reason. Too astute not to realise the contrast between his pre-war manner and the new heroic spirit which was leading him, with his fine contempt for danger, into deeds of prowess, he assumed a military, sabre-rattling attitude. But when a man, even of D'Annunzio's adaptability, has passed the age of fifty, he can scarcely expect to effect so radical a transformation without attracting the gaze of observing eyes. No one, faced with this new and therefore artificial D'Annunzio, could escape the slight but real discomfort inevitably caused by a jarring note.

Little by little, however, these physical dissonances have disappeared. Age toned down the glaring colours until, somewhere between 1920 and 1930, the Poet arrived at normality. His appearance can never be venerable, for his features will not

permit of that. But there are times when he looks at eternity as if it were standing by his side, and at such times the face composes itself into a tragic mask which will never be forgotten by those who have seen it—the mask of Immortality.

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There exist a number of portraits of Gabriele D'Annunzio, along with thousands of photographs, pen drawings, carbons, sanguines and one excellent miniature—one of the earliest oil paintings dates between 1885 and 1889. Another, from the clever brush of Romaine Brooks, the American artist, was finished in 1912. This is now in Paris in the Musée de Luxembourg. Its black and grey tones give to the Poet a cadaverous appearance. It is a work of great merit and is highly esteemed by D'Annunzio himself. A third, showing the Poet with a bandaged eye and playing with a lizard, was done by Sibellato at Venice. A fourth, signed by Carolus Duran, was painted in Rome in 1915 while the great artist was Director of the Académie Française of the Villa Medici. This portrait never satisfied either D'Annunzio or Duran, who expressed his willingness to begin again. It shows an effeminate D'Annunzio in a pose recalling the work of Boldini. Appearing, as it did, at the beginning of the war, it only served to belittle the great soldier-poet. A more recent painting, which I have not seen, is by Fabricotti. Lastly, there is the canvas of Cadorin on which the artist, with a hankering for the "Primitives" and a facetiousness all his own, has shown D'Annunzio in the nude with a monocle in his eye. This picture is at the Vittoriale.

CHAPTER II

THE MORAL AND THE IMMORAL MAN

D'Annunzio's enemies—The Emperor Helogabalus—"sacro-egotism"—A man without rancour—The fifty-two bombs of the aviator von Muller—H.R.H. the Prince of Udine—The Poet protects a tenor—"Beata Solitudo, Sola Beatitudo"—Decorations—D'Annunzio, "Ban of Croatia"—Joachim Murat—The Gordon Bennett Cup—Promises—An eloquent Buddha.

It is often said that a man's greatness may be measured by the number of his enemies. To grasp the magnitude of the Poet's greatness, let us, then, note the natural and inveterate enemies who have assailed him. They comprise ninety-nine out of every hundred artists because they are humiliated by D'Annunzio's sublimity; all the fools in the world because they do not understand him; practising Catholics because of *Piacere* and the *Intermezzo di Rime*; Free-thinkers because of *Saint-Sébastien* and the *Contemplazione della Morte*; all the women he has met to whom he has failed to make love; all married men, because they consider him a disciple of adultery; many bachelors because, through his books, he makes women more complicated and more exacting; his creditors because he makes them wait for payment; his debtors because, being few in number, they have a double cause for dissatisfaction; all those to whom he has forgotten to give a signed photograph, etc., etc.

Estimating conservatively, D'Annunzio has dozens of millions of enemies, known and unknown.

Consequently, his greatness being beyond dispute, we can make a list of his friends or, at least, of those upon whose devotion he can rely. They are his dogs and his horses; a dozen tried and faithful friends; his servants, not only those who are actually in his service, but those who, at one time or another, have been in his employment; some thousands of fanatics, admirers and Legionaries; *One Woman*, the one who, at any given moment, believes herself exclusively loved by him.

The proportion between his friends and his enemies having

been thus established, it will surprise no reader to learn that, in the course of his long and adventurous career, D'Annunzio has been accused of polygamy, adultery, theft, incest, secret vices, simony, murder and, as will be seen in another chapter, cannibalism. It has also been repeated *ad nauseam* that he is unmoral; that he has been kept by women; that he delights in destroying happy homes; that he betrays his friends and all those faithful to him; that he has disowned his sons; that, in short, Heliogabalus is his master in no particular.

D'Annunzio has never replied to any of these calumnies except by the three following arguments: a formidable literary production, an imperturbable disdain and an iron constitution—marvellous arguments, these, but not a very helpful contribution towards the study of his character and his temperament. Beyond an oft-expressed intention to write and publish his confessions one day, he has said little and written less about himself.

In certain passages of *Faville di Maglio* he indulges in some rather searching self-examination, but these instances are few. I am tempted to risk the assertion that he has most fully and sincerely summarised his own personality in a letter written to Cesare Fontana on the 20th May, 1879. D'Annunzio was then sixteen. Here it is, and it is what he has often called his "soul picture": "*There is implanted in my heart an excessive desire for knowledge and glory. This often inspires me with a deep and torturing melancholy, and it makes me weep. I am intolerant of any control, quick to anger and as ready to take offence as to forgive. I am loyal and fiercely contemptuous of vileness: an ardent lover of New Art and of beautiful women: peculiar in my tastes: tenacious of my opinions: brutally frank: prodigal to the point of wastefulness: enthusiastic to the pitch of folly——*"

Well, except for his assertion that he is "tenacious of his opinions," no description could be more exact. It is a sort of *curriculum vitæ* traced in advance.

As for those opinions expressed by others on the human quality of D'Annunzio's very extraordinary brain, these must not be accepted, for they do not represent anything more than incomplete studies of brief periods and rare circumstances in the life of the Poet. In addition, I regard with suspicion that grotesquely arbitrary method of criticism which would attribute

to him every spiritual and mental idiosyncrasy to be found in the characters in his books. It should be recognised that the minds of these characters merely reflect in some measure certain of their creator's thoughts.

Whoever undertakes the study of D'Annunzio's character with a view to finding a logical explanation of his acts must base his investigations on the presence in the Poet's nature of unprepossessing elements, due partly to his boundless talent for assimilation and partly to the complexity of his desires and impulses. He is such a mixture of contradictions that it is frequently impossible to account for his actions. He has written that "*there is no creature more changeable or more firm, more combative or more peaceful than I am.*" He is constant only in good qualities or in definite failings, and they are so innate that no earthly force can ever alter them.

Not to be prodigal, not to be patriotic, not to be selfish, not to be sensual, not to be kind, not to be irresolute, would be as impossible for him as it would be impossible for him to change his sex or his age. But it is very possible for him to be patient in the morning, irascible at noon, easily swayed at one moment and stubborn as a mule the next.

In a letter, written in his youth to a well-beloved woman, he describes himself thus: "*Prodigal, waster, rash, generous, affectionate, egotistical, sad, tameless and untamed, all in the briefest space of time.*" Adjectives may be added, but none may be subtracted from this colourful portrait.

Among the more stable of his qualities are: kindliness, goodness of heart, spiritual and material generosity. D'Annunzio possesses goodness to so superlative a degree that he never purposely harms anyone, and he cannot witness suffering without doing everything in his power to alleviate it. He is so conscious of his uncontrollable generosity that he often elects to ignore suffering lest he be unable to resist the temptation to render comfort and assistance. This is doubtless a form of selfishness, but I prefer to describe it as "sacro-egotism," for it is a necessary measure of self-protection on D'Annunzio's part against encroachment by his neighbours, not only on the immortal works he produces, but on his liberty to live and lead his own life, so replete with splendid deeds. There may

have been lapses, but he is fundamentally affectionate, and he displays a kindliness of thought and a courtesy of behaviour without rival.

His courtesy is particularly noticeable when he is conversing with others. He never appears bored. This habit has won him innumerable sympathies, for no one has ever dreamed that D'Annunzio's thoughts may be far away when an intense interest in the subject at hand is written on his face.

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I am well aware that countless women, could they make their voices heard, would protest loudly against all I have said of D'Annunzio's kindness and great-heartedness. In their eyes, the Poet is ungrateful, treacherous and sadistic. This may be true, and, if it is, here is the reason: D'Annunzio has never been willing to believe that love can make a woman suffer. He therefore doubts the sincerity of their expressions of grief, believing firmly that their emotion is transitory. He sees no reason to be compassionate, and is capable of witnessing the most poignant manifestation of feminine sorrow with as little compunction as a dentist feels for a nervous patient.

The fact is that, for D'Annunzio, women are necessary enemies. His attitude toward them is consistently logical and quite natural. But, apart from his relationship with women, his magnanimity has known neither lapses nor contradictions. Furthermore, the word "rancour" has no meaning for him, as will be seen from the following incident. Herr von Müller was for years his German translator. The affinities of taste which drew them to each other produced, in time, a sincere friendship. Not only did they work together, but they met repeatedly both in Italy and France. The war broke out, and Müller became an aviator. He was a member of the air squadron which bombed Venice. Müller knew well the Poet's house, the famous "Casa Rossa" on the Grand Canal, and, a good German, he did not spare it but, rather, selected it as a favourite target. When D'Annunzio met Müller after the war, he said: "*You dropped fifty-two bombs on my house. Excellent work. Bravo, von Müller! I esteem and love you more than ever.*"

Nevertheless, D'Annunzio would never have dropped fifty-

two or any bombs on Müller's house, for his instinctive incurable chivalry would have restrained him.

Here is a somewhat different illustration: All the world knows how Nitti acted in regard to Fiume. He used his position as Prime Minister to ridicule D'Annunzio's heroic gesture—a gesture far beyond Nitti's comprehension and appreciation. He needlessly and deliberately inflicted hardship on the City by depriving it of the railway facilities essential to the transportation of provisions and clothing provided by the Red Cross. For this, the Legionaries burned him in effigy in the principal square. His notoriously stupid and vindictive methods were summed up once and for all when D'Annunzio jestingly nicknamed him "The Coward." Nitti heard this name on every hand, and he hated D'Annunzio more than before. When the project of collecting all the works of the Poet in a National Edition was in progress, a Committee of Honour was formed which included every outstanding personality in the sphere of politics and art. In spite of this, certain of D'Annunzio's friends had seen to it that Francesco Saverio Nitti was not included. D'Annunzio noticed the omission on the printed list, and wrote to me in Milan: "*The question of his exclusion is of no interest to me, but I imagine that the members of the Committee intend to honour me. Why should I forbid even the most ignoble adversary to recognise my work? How can the 'homage' of 'The Coward' or of others offend me? I must neither discuss nor elect. All this concerns the National Institution alone.*"

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Never, to my knowledge, has D'Annunzio defamed a vanquished enemy, nor has he allowed others to hint at such a thing, in fact, one of the best ways to arouse D'Annunzio's sympathy for a man is to belittle him.

As for his spiritual and material generosity, I can only repeat that they are unlimited. Giving with him is more than a hobby: it is a positive passion. Even when horse sense forbids extravagance, he cannot resist it. With him, the impulse is stronger than sane reason. He has always showered presents on everyone—his friends, his enemies, the humble, the great, women, children, strangers. He gives directly and through intermediaries;

he gives when he has plenty; he gives when he has next to nothing at all; he is always giving. And he never dreams of giving inexpensive presents.

One day in 1922 he asked me to send him from Milan to the Vittoriale some gold and silver cigarette cases, some rings, a few tie-pins and similar jewellery because he wanted to choose *two or three* presents. I sent him twenty-odd samples, and a few days later I wrote to ask him to return the ones he did not want. This is the reply: "*I am keeping most of the jewellery, as there are presents I must give to a number of relatives, legitimate and illegitimate. But the jeweller must reduce the bill to 80,000 lire. I have added up the total. On the 1st August I shall pay him 15,000 lire on account.*"

Sometimes he jokes about this mania. Once when, at Gardone, he was with H.R.H. the Prince of Udine, he slipped a magnificent ring from the third finger of his left hand (it was formed of a golden eagle holding in its claws a heart-shaped ruby) and offered it to the Prince. "*Allow me, your Highness, to make you a present of this. They say that I am a prodigal and a spendthrift. It is untrue. I give you the ring on one condition—if it fits you on the same finger as it fits me.*" The Prince tried the ring, and found that it might well have been made for him. "*What a pity!*" said D'Annunzio, "*but wear it always: it will bring you luck.*"

It would seem that his one interest in making money is to be in a position to give costly presents. He likes to say: "*I am entitled to expect not to be plundered because, all my life, I have given all that has been asked of me and much for which I have never been asked. To cheat me would be unforgivable.*" And I should state that, when he speaks of being cheated, he refers to mean and deliberate fraud, because he has always endured unprotestingly and forgiven readily petty dishonesty.

When he lived on the Avenue Kléber in Paris he used to find an Italian tenor waiting to beg small sums from him whenever he left the house. D'Annunzio regularly gave him twenty francs, and the tenor—so I discovered—regularly drank the money with a pretty woman at the Café de Paris. I told the Poet, who asked me: "*What do you expect him to do with twenty francs? Buy a motor car?*" And, quite cheerfully, he continued to make his daily contribution.

General Vaccari, a war comrade of D'Annunzio's, when visiting

him at the Vittoriale, asked the Poet for a pair of cuff-links. "I love the ones you gave to Mussolini," the General said, to be explicit; "they have a little effigy of Victory on them." It so happened that D'Annunzio was wearing the only similar pair of links. He went off to his room, and returned a moment later with the effigies of Victory. Vaccari, having thanked him profusely, noticed and commented on the fact that his host's cuffs were unbuttoned. "*I hardly ever wear cuff-links, because they tinkle and distract me when I am writing,*" he replied.

One of the Poet's favourite sayings is: "*The things that I have given are still mine.*" Were that true in the literal sense, all the rooms in the Vittoriale would not suffice to house his possessions.

If D'Annunzio is extravagantly generous about giving presents, his manner of tipping is simply prodigal. He tips the man who punches his ticket at the railway station; he tips the man who looks at the ticket on the train; he tips the servants who open the doors in the homes of his friends; he tips the attendants in museums; he tips the urchin who picks up the handkerchief he has dropped; he tips the urchin's friend who is sneering at such wasted energy. The amount of the tip has nothing to do with the amount of effort expended, but on the amount of pleasure derived by the Poet.

If the postman brings him a money-order for 1,000 lire he may receive as much as 100 lire on occasion; and if he brings one for 30,000 lire, although his effort remains the same, he is likely to receive 500.

At hotels D'Annunzio employs a special system. He gives a preliminary tip on his arrival and a final tip on his departure. "*Remember,*" he explained to me one day, "*that if you wish to be well served the staff must be warned in advance that you are an interesting person. It is extremely dangerous to allow them to draw their own conclusions.*"

Quick to form unfavourable opinions of others—this is one of D'Annunzio's outstanding faults—he is slow to form favourable ones. He expects others' opinions to be evil. He is surprised when they are good. His mind applies similar standards when he estimates the intellectual qualities of his fellow-men. Evidence of intelligence, and particularly of insight or intuition invariably astounds him. He constantly makes remarks of this sort: "*But*

how can that be? You don't mean to tell me you noticed that?" or: *"How strange that you should know that! How did you discover it? Where did you read it? How did it happen to occur to you?"*

In his relationship with strangers, and even friends, he is suspicious. It is almost a fetish with him, when there is the slightest cause for doubt, to place the worst possible construction on the other fellow's conduct. This mere assumption suffices to enrage him, and he accuses the supposed offender of having betrayed his friendship. The most trivial incident may give rise to such a misunderstanding, even when an old and esteemed acquaintance is concerned. And once the damage has been done, it requires months of time and reams of paper to repair it. When he is finally convinced of his error, he is full of remorse, yet by a strange twist of his temperament, he will avoid the injured person.

This brings about a continued estrangement for a second reason: D'Annunzio can never decide just how to frame an apology. These baseless ostracisms have often lasted long years. And then, one fine day, Fate brings the Poet face to face with the victim of his "judicial error," and he embraces him with every appearance of forgiving a crime which the other has never even dreamed of committing.

When I lived with D'Annunzio in the French "Landes," he frequently sent me to Paris to get him things he wanted, such as rare editions, *objets d'art*, documents, addresses and the like. He enumerated the errands aloud, and I noted them. It sometimes happened that I returned having forgotten some insignificant item, such as a stick of sealing-wax or a bottle of perfume. The Poet was then certain to say: *"Of course, you would have forgotten that!"* And ten years later, giving me instructions, he was quite capable of remarking: *"And don't do as you did at Arcachon. You forgot the sealing-wax. Really, we must do something about that memory of yours!"*

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Among the multiple charges laid at D'Annunzio's door by his enemies there are two which are still widely current: that he is *unmoral* and that he is prone to self-advertisement.

Let us consider these charges objectively.

First, if the dictionary definition is acceptable, unmorality is not a charge at all. It may be an unsympathetic quality, but it is not censurable. The man who squints is not blamed for his imperfect vision, and the hunchback is not condemned because his spine is crooked. The unmoral being is one who possesses no moral sense.

Those who have wished to attack D'Annunzio should have accused him of immorality, but not of unmorality. Then they could have argued that, so profound and so unusual was his insight into the moral law, that, infringing upon it, he did so knowingly and deliberately. Now let us see wherein the Poet has been or is immoral. This is a delicate discussion, but it must be faced.

I begin by asserting that D'Annunzio's immoralities are those of which ninety men in a hundred would be guilty had they the assurance of impunity and secrecy.

What married man refuses the secret advances of a woman merely out of respect for the marriage bond? In theory, all men lay claim to such heroic restraint, especially in the presence of their wives and mothers-in-law, but, questioned in private, they will readily admit that theory and practice are totally distinct. Is there to-day a bachelor who, enamoured of a married woman, emulates the conduct of Joseph with Potiphar's wife? Is there a husband who, living apart from his wife by mutual consent, refuses to live with the woman he loves, when she is free, purely because of the dictates of the moral code? Yet if we except certain monstrous, grotesque and easily refuted accusations with which I shall deal elsewhere, these, and only these, are the crimes with which he is or has been charged by unemployed Catos or Puritans on holiday.

Obviously, D'Annunzio is not a white-winged angel, seated between Cherubim and Seraphim. Still, there is a vast distance between the views and the character of the Poet and those—shall we say?—of the Marquis de Sade. D'Annunzio has always been a free lance, a great artist, a vigorous pursuer of new sensations, whether found in dealing with a self-willed woman or in a flight over enemy batteries in action. He is a sensualist in the fullest sense of the term. He has ever taken pleasure where and

when he has found it. Nor has he been minded to renounce an amorous quest at the bidding of some paterfamilias, whose private life was probably not one whit better than his own. He frequently says: "*One can only attain knowledge at the cost of plunging into the realities of life.*"

We may blame him, then, for being a sceptic like Aristippus or a cynic like Diogenes. We may call him an epicure or a hedonist. We lack not for unkindly epithets, but, to my mind, we go far when we count him immoral.

Now let us examine his supposed mania for self-advertisement. Many artists, particularly those who have failed or have been unappreciated, have declared that much of D'Annunzio's fame is the result of his skill at blowing his own horn. According to them, the Poet is a charlatan who unduly vaunts his own wares. But these wares are the literary works of Gabriele D'Annunzio. There are some fifty volumes of sublime poetry and masterly prose and nearly all are destined to immortality.

Let us smile lest we be tempted to weep before such pettiness! Let us examine wherein lies this self-advertisement, so hypocritically deplored by the Poet's implacable enemies. Is he accused because he has been so continually in debt? because he has owned so many dogs and horses? because he went voluntarily into exile? I think not. He is accused because his fame stinks in the nostrils of those who are jealous of his renown. And if all this fame is so easily acquired, why have others not blown their horns as loudly as D'Annunzio?

It is discouraging, I admit, for an author to recognise that he bores his public, to be forced to toady to old school friends to obtain a favourable notice in the press; "to sweat through seven shirts" to get a sonnet or a story published in some provincial newspaper. But is this discouragement sufficient cause to condemn D'Annunzio for all the high rewards which have come to him since he was fourteen—rewards which he has received without lifting a finger or spending a penny?

One of the most effective forms of self-advertisement is to show oneself. D'Annunzio, since the age of thirty, and with the exception of Fiume, has shown himself so little that there are many who doubt of his very existence. He has been known to shut himself within four walls for months, and even years.

When he lived on the hill of Settignano, he scarcely ever went down into Florence. In France he kept to his villa for nearly two years and set eyes on no one. And, at the Vittoriale, he now lives the life of a recluse. In spite of all the gossip to the contrary, he has never worn parti-coloured stockings. In sixty-five years he has never attended a conference. In December, 1916, when he was asked to speak on the naval question at the "Trocadéro," in Paris, he wrote to me: "*I made him understand what you know well—that it is impossible to go to Paris and avoid the 'Caudine Forks' of officialdom, the inevitable decorations—*" In 1922, in a letter asking me to apologise for his absence to the organiser of an important conference in Milan, to which he had been invited, he wrote: "*Do you think it likely that I would consent to appear publicly in Milan and face an audience of boiled shirts?*"

When the war ended, he paid no official visits to Rome nor to any foreign capital. He never figured at a ceremony, a banquet, a reception or social festivity, and he never sat on a committee. In 1921 he wrote me from Cargnacco: "*Please understand that I neither want nor care to be a member of any committee.*"

* * * * *

Has he ambition or vanity? It would be unfair to say that he has solicited honours. Nevertheless, as an impartial biographer, I must admit that he understands the art of intimating when honours will be welcome.

At the beginning of the war, when, after the flight which resulted in the loss of an eye, he received the silver medal for military valour, he was as jubilant as a child. This is a human trait, and common with those who pretend indifference to distinctions for valour. And remember the importance of medals during the first months of the war!

But, after the first medal, decorations, like ripe cherries, began to fall on him like a cascade. Nearly all the Allies decorated him. D'Annunzio's swelling chest assumed the hues of a rainbow. For a time the Poet wore all his medals regularly, and that is adequate proof that he was proud of them. I will go further and say that, when he had not as yet received a decoration from France, Serbia or Belgium, he had no scruple about suggesting

that I take steps to "*arouse the sleepers.*" Here are some letters on the subject:

Under date of the 22nd April, 1918, he wrote: "*I had been led to expect the Serbian gold medal, which all the others have received, and also the Belgian Order of Leopold, particularly after the fine words the King spoke to me when he visited my naval squadron on the Lido. Have you heard nothing?*"

"*The Ode is for Serbia. Belgium is forgetful.*"

"*My comrades want to know the why and the wherefore. They won't even leave my decorations alone.*"

In this letter he enclosed a copy of the recommendation for the Cross of the Military Order of Savoia, and he added: "*It would be well to have a trustworthy translation made of this. It should be in current diplomatic language, but should in no way lower the lofty note of the text. The task is one for which I am unsuited. I particularly commend it to you.*"

Previously to this he had written, in November, 1916: "*The war is still uncertain. I am called upon for great efforts here. But I confess that I would be proud to wear a French decoration even though I have only been engaged on the 'single front' and have already two silver medals for valour. Does not SUCH AN ALLY deserve the Croix de Guerre? It is the only recognition of my services that would give me any satisfaction. Yesterday evening, Capitaine de Beauchamp was astonished to learn that I had not received it. Do see to it.*"

"*Two medals for valour, a solemn encomium and promotion for war service—all obtained on the 'single front': these give me a straight claim to the Croix de Guerre, that distinctive sign of the warrior. It is the only mark of gratitude I would really appreciate on the part of France.*"

And, a few days later, he wrote: "*I am still perplexed about my trip to Paris. The Minister of War is now General Lyautey, who knows me well. Perhaps it is easier to broach the subject of the Croix de Guerre.*" Curiously enough, Lyautey was commissioned, some time later, to decorate D'Annunzio with the famous Cross personally.

In June, 1918, D'Annunzio wrote: "*I want you to know that by an unanimous vote I have been awarded the Cross of the Military Order of Savoia for services rendered in the engagement at the Carso*"

in August, 1917. I have also received the Medal of Valour for services at Buccari. Now I have five medals. The recommendation for the Cross is so beautiful that I would like our Allies to see it. Send copies to the 'Figaro' and 'Le Temps.' "

But as the years passed the decorations acquired gradually in their proper time and place began to bore him. He wore them by fits and starts. And then, one day, after he had abandoned Fiume, he burned them all, declaring that all this "ironmongery" was absurd. After that, he wore only the insignia of the "Mutilated," and often forgot even that. He asked: "*What does all this scandalous vainglory matter to me?*"

At the age of forty, D'Annunzio was by no means averse to becoming a Senator of the Realm. He told me as much on more than one occasion. Yet, at fifty-five, not only did he no longer hanker after this distinction, but he even wrote to me: "*They must not dare think of it. Make that clear to whomsoever it may concern.*"

When, at Fiume, the heroic Admiral Cagni, Count di Bu-Meliana, D'Annunzio's most intimate friend, visited the conquered city and asked the *Comandante* officially, in the name of the Italian Government, whether he would be willing to accept the title of the "Count of Fiume," D'Annunzio laughed in his face, and said: "*Why not 'Ban of Croatia'? Don't you think it sounds better?*" However, when, a year later, the King of Italy made him Prince di Montenevoso, he was obviously pleased. He proved his satisfaction by the care he took in selecting a motto. He made meticulous heraldic investigations and gave much thought to the subject.

But here is still another characteristic contradiction. If anyone addresses him as "Prince," D'Annunzio turns a deaf ear to the speaker, pretending to think that the title is not meant for him, and whereas many—perhaps most—in his place would have had the crest embroidered on their linen and engraved on their personal belongings, it has never occurred to him to do so. If any objects are found in the Vittoriale which are an exception to this rule we may be certain that they are gifts from others.

For years he seemed to have no liking for military titles; but when Mussolini's Government promoted him to the rank of

brigadier-general, he was so enchanted that he immediately had his uniforms decorated with the insignia of a General of . . . DIVISION!

And who was there to reprimand him for this high-handed procedure? What authentic Divisional General, in dread of being retired at any moment for "reasons of health," would have thought of reporting or arresting the Prince of Montenevoso for having arbitrarily assumed a rank higher than that to which he was entitled? Did Napoleon ever pay any attention to the fantastic uniforms of Joachim Murat?

D'Annunzio's bravery is known to everybody. He proved his courage a hundred times during the war and afterwards at Fiume, where, emulating Napoleon at Jaffa, he visited the plague-stricken. Not only did he comfort them with words, but, subduing his horror of all loathsome things, he even touched their sores as a sign that there was nothing to fear.

Yet, D'Annunzio may be called cowardly where the minor troubles and difficulties of existence are concerned. Little worries, not to mention big ones, devastate him. He is capable of a sort of passive patience, but he cannot cope with annoyances. When we were in Arcachon, he decided to dismiss a groom, but he so disliked the idea of tackling the job himself and so dreaded recrimination or entreaty on the part of the unfortunate servant, that *he went to Paris*, from where he wired me to know whether I had succeeded in getting rid of him. To avoid a luncheon at the Italian Embassy, to which the Princess Laetitia Bonaparte had also been invited, he resorted to the following stratagem. Taking advantage of the fact that the Gordon Bennett Cup race fell on the same day, he let it be known that he was going to it by air. Then he sent me off in a motor to a tiny village remote from Paris so that I could telegraph in his name that he had been forced to land in this forgotten spot. He ate an excellent lunch at the Hôtel Meurice, happy and—alone!

He was so delighted with the success of the dodge that he used it again to avoid an official reception. This time he wrote the message himself, and instructed his chauffeur to telephone it to the host: "*Monseigneur D'Annunzio is marooned in an observation balloon at Issy-les-Moulineaux. It is still uncertain when he can be released.*"

These illustrations of his love for solitude—"Beata Solitudo, Sola Beatitudo" is his constant quotation—remind me of another of his characteristics: he has a distaste, which approaches a horror, of the proximity of his fellow-men.

It is curious that D'Annunzio has so often been pictured as being "drunk with worldliness." Nothing is more remote from the truth. He is mildly fond of sport, and madly fond of women; but that is not enough to brand him as a man-about-town, particularly as one of the first requisites for the latter rôle is popularity with one's own sex, and D'Annunzio frankly despises masculine society. Club-life frightens him. I am ready to wager that he has not entered a bar or a café, unless with a woman, thirty times in all his long life, and on those rare occasions when I have discovered him trying to kill an hour in such a place, he has looked for all the world like a fish out of water.

Never having played billiards, caring little for tobacco, never having touched cards or cocktails, having a dread of crowds, he thinks of cafés, bars and tea-rooms as mysterious places where "fakirs" of both sexes sit for endless hours in front of marble tables and thus expose themselves to the proximity of all who choose to approach, and the mere thought sends shivers up and down his spine.

D'Annunzio's admiration for the *Carabinieri* dates from the moment when, at the Vittoriale, they rescued him from an importunate mob. He was so grateful that, had it been permitted, he would have heaped honours on these gallant militiamen. And the chief merit he attributes to me is that, for years, I preserved and defended his isolation. In a letter commending me to Mussolini, he wrote: "*During the many long years he passed with me during my exile in France, I enjoyed his constant and vigilant help. He handled difficult situations and defended me with brilliant skill from profiteers and would-be parasites.*"

In 1922 he wrote to me: "*I am discouraged and disgusted, and I am thinking seriously of retiring to a Trappist monastery far from the incurable ingratitude of men.*" In April, 1929, when, as he put it, there was a "*furious affluence of visitors,*" he wrote: "*I am expecting guests for the shoot—some illustrious and some obscure. And you are no longer here to protect me, as in bygone days,*

against crowds and intrigues. I have a dark mood on, the worst of moods, a vile mood."

He frequently speaks of "*the crude love of solitude*," which he considers inherited from his mother. At times when he is talking to someone, he is seized with an irresistible impulse to be alone because the conversation bores him, because he suddenly feels the urge to write, or simply because of some ridiculous whim. He smiles and apologises, leaves the room, and the visitor sees him again—a year later. Half an hour after having made his escape, D'Annunzio sends a most courteous note in which he excuses himself on the grounds of important business, and he fixes an appointment for the following day. The first note is followed by other notes, each one more charming and more evasive than the last. The visitor or the friend eventually departs discouraged at heart.

In his early youth he wrote to a friend who had asked him his views on life: "*One must struggle to develop to its highest point the sense of isolation and impermanence. One must, little by little, break all the ties which bind one to life, and which involve such a waste of precious energy. I know of no more distasteful epithet for a man than to call him 'happy.'*" What he wrote in his teens, he has stuck to through the years.

And yet perhaps the most sympathetic trait he has is an innate cheerfulness, childlike and irrepressible, which he quite rightly attributes to the magnificent functioning of his organism. He is not only cheerful for himself but, when he desires, he can be a centre of cheerfulness, amusing and diverting all those about him. He is conscious of his gift, for he has written: "*I shall pour out the ever-flowing waters of my laughter even in the hours of deepest sadness.*"

He delights in good-natured practical jokes, and never objects to being victimised in his turn.

At Genoa in 1915, after the great speech at Quarto which persuaded Italy to side with the Allies in the war, he suddenly felt the need of a solitary walk. I accompanied him because he is so accustomed to my presence that he can ignore it. As the sun was setting, we came upon a Punch and Judy show, surrounded by a crowd of ecstatic children. The Poet sat down in their midst and stayed for two hours. He would not have torn

himself away even then, had not the owner of the show, recognising him and thinking it his duty to prove himself a good *interventista*, made one of the marionettes attack another and say: "Thus shall we deal with Giolitti if he does not stop." (Giolitti opposed Italy's entry into the war.) The Poet laughed heartily. Then he turned to me and said: "*The political allusions are beginning. We had best be off.*"

D'Annunzio is an incorrigible tease. He is particularly fond of jesting in this way with women and children. He pretends that he has forgotten something he has promised to bring them. He pretends to be greatly annoyed by the merest trifles. He asks awkward questions. He makes outrageously offensive remarks with a mock air of being serious. He turns his polished wit on to tiny failings. He admits this weakness: "*Try as I may to rid myself of my faults, I have never been able to break the bad habit of teasing my fellows. My mother used even to recall a memory of my babyhood: 'When your nurse gave you her left breast, you insisted on the other, just to upset her.'*"

He carries the contradictory spirit to an extreme and nothing avails against his obstinacy. Eleonora Duse, having used all her persuasion to prevent him from some foolish act, said: "He simply must have his own way"; and Rocco Pesce, his famous valet, summed up his master's failing in the Abruzzi dialect: "*Un ce sa po!*" ("There is nothing doing.") D'Annunzio is rather proud of this fault. By way of exalting it and, incidentally, to discourage feminine illusions, he used to have his favourite motto, "Who shall keep me chained?" engraved on all the objects he presented to women.

* * * * *

I must not conclude this chapter without mentioning another of the Poet's weaknesses, one which has caused him more worries and made him more enemies than all the others put together and yet which has its origin in a laudable sentiment: the wish to satisfy everybody. It is the habit of making promises which are never kept.

With passing years, this habit has so grown on D'Annunzio that he makes promises to people who have never dreamed of asking him for anything. He has promised to visit cities, to take

part in ceremonies, to witness marriages, to write prefaces, to preside over assemblies, to captain idealistic enterprises, to accept high appointments. And nearly every promise has been broken. There have been no exceptions, not even when there have been signatures, counter-signatures, telegrams, letters, confirmation direct and indirect, solemn undertakings and official stamps and seals.

Yet there remain trusting souls who are convinced that, by some special dispensation of Providence, the promise D'Annunzio makes to them will be kept.

For years I tried to find out why the Poet seemed to delight in going back on his word. Time—that fine old gentleman—finally satisfied my curiosity. I was staying at the Vittoriale. On a certain day, D'Annunzio had promised to intervene at a definite time, in a definite place, in a definite manner. Discretion prevents me from going into details. However, I may state that the promise had been made six months before and had, in the interval, been confirmed in countless ways.

Telegrams began to arrive. Cars stood outside with engines throbbing. Weary of waiting, those concerned were watching the silent house of the Poet as the faithful, eager for a miracle, watch the sacred ampulla which holds the blood of San Gennaro. For nearly twelve hours no one within the Vittoriale had set eyes on D'Annunzio. He had locked himself in his study, in an impenetrable seclusion.

I finally took my courage in both hands and knocked at the door. D'Annunzio appeared. He was clad in his working costume and his face wore an expression of seraphic calm.

"But don't you know that to-day is the——?"

"Yes."

"And that it's two o'clock in the afternoon?"

"Yes."

"And that at least sixty people have been waiting for you for hours?"

"Yes."

"Well, what about it?"

"Wait!" D'Annunzio took a small ivory Buddha from a box and, handing it to me, said: "*Read what is engraved on that.*"

The words that met my eyes were: "*Me ne frego.*" ("*I don't care a fig.*")

CHAPTER III

D'ANNUNZIO'S INSEPARABLE COMPANION

The sailing-boat *Tartan Irene*—Signor Rapagnetta—The austere and infallible *Larousse*—The obstinate settler—The triclinium and the roses—The Poet's wig—"Oh, sweet Italy!"—The disaster of Eleanora Duse—D'Annunzio sells his country to the foreigner!—The shameless plagiarist—A latter-day Nero—D'Annunzio and the widow—Reported death of the Poet.

SINCE the 12th March, 1863, Gabriele D'Annunzio has had a faithful companion who has never left his side for a moment, and who has shared the greater as well as the smaller vicissitudes of his life, at times serving him faithfully and well, at others abusing him with an entirely undeserved acrimony.

This rare companion is Dame Legend.

Gabriele D'Annunzio was born at Pescara on the 12th March, 1863, at eight in the morning, in the house of his parents. On that occasion the peaceful habitation of Don Paolo Francesco D'Annunzio became the scene of the proceedings which, in all honest and God-fearing homes, inevitably accompany the arrival of a new baby.

The midwife first announced the sex of the new-born child to the assembled family, then swathed and presented it to its mother. After that the infant was placed in the cradle which had been standing in readiness for its arrival.

For centuries this ceremonial has been repeated in all civilised countries. Therefore we can take it for granted that events took a similar course in the house of Don Paolo Francesco D'Annunzio at Pescara. But Fate (necessarily omniscient about the future of every human being) urgently called in Dame Legend, who, light and invisible, slipped into the room where little Gabriele alternately slept and wailed.

She bent over him and, after pondering for a while, solemnly declared that *he was born on board the "Tartan Irene" in the middle of the Adriatic*. It is, then, no source of wonder that Gabriele D'Annunzio, having reached maturity, and become a

great man, should have unhesitatingly accepted this story of his birth and even corroborated it, if we are to believe Monsieur Amédée Pigeon, one of his interviewers. On the contrary, it is perfectly logical, because already in 1882, some time before this interview, Eduardo Scarfoglio, his friend, had written: "This son of the sea was born on the *Irene* on a journey between Trieste and Pescara." D'Annunzio may have thought: "If Scarfoglio says so, why should I contradict him?"

And, indeed, this story so completely responds to D'Annunzio's tastes that he has never sought to disprove it. It was a most satisfactory legend.

Would Napoleon, in similar circumstances, have denied that he was placed, new-born, on a carpet whose design depicted an episode in the life of Achilles?

But let us follow the machinations of Dame Legend, who since that day has dogged the footsteps of the Prince of Montenevoso.

The christening took place according to the sacred rites of the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church and the secular laws of the young Italian realm. Since the father's name was D'Annunzio, it is only natural that the child should have figured under the same patronymic as his brothers and sisters, the Christian name being a matter of choice. Don Paolo Francesco's father had made him promise a long while previously that the next grandson should bear the name of Gabriele, in honour of the guardian saint of one of his fishing-boats. "Let us call him Gabriele. Gabriele D'Annunzio! A fine-sounding name!" And so it was done.

All this, of course, was officially registered in a birth certificate which is still accessible, to one and all, among the other birth certificates of the municipality of Pescara. I append a faithful copy:

"There appeared before us, Silla de Marinis, Mayor and officer of the Registry Office of Pescara, province of Abruzzo Citra, Don Camillo Rapagnetta, son of Carlo Vincenzo, deceased, aged 78 years, householder, domiciled in Pescara, who presented to us a male child, recognised by us as such. He declared that the same was issue of Donna Luisa de Benedictis, aged 25 years, domiciled in Pescara, and Don Francesco Paolo

D'Annunzio, aged 25 years, householder, domiciled in Pescara, on the 12th day of above month, at 8 a.m., in the house and residence of the parents. The same, moreover, declared the child's name as GABRIELE. The aforesaid presentation made in the presence of Don Vincenzo Solari, aged 37 years, civil servant, native of and domiciled in Pescara, and of Emilio Isidoro, aged 25 years, tradesman by profession, native of, and likewise domiciled in Pescara, witnesses produced by the above Signor Camillo Rapagnetta. This present act has been read to the declarant and to the witnesses—Camillo Rapagnetta—Vincenzo Solari—witness—Emilio Isidoro—witness The MAYOR: Silla de Marinis—The SECRETARY: A. Brunetti. The PARISH PRIEST of San Cetto has returned to us on the 14th March the notification which we transmitted to him on the 13th March of aforesaid year, to which he has contributed the additional statement that the Holy Sacrament of Baptism was administered to Gabriele D'Annunzio on the 13th March, receipt of which we have confirmed. The officer of the Municipality: DE MARINIS, Mayor; Brunetti, Secretary."

* * * *

But Dame Legend was not to be so easily satisfied, and, being in a perverse mood, decided to vent her spleen in a questionable joke played on D'Annunzio. In perusing the birth certificate, as the reader has just done, she came across a rather ridiculous name—Don Camillo Rapagnetta. True, the seventy-eight-year-old householder had merely declared the infant's birth. But what of that? The occasion was too tempting to be passed over, and Dame Legend, who would have had a more honoured standing if she had not been so prone to invent idle tales, hastened to inform the world at large that Gabriele D'Annunzio was only a pseudonym, and that the real name of the poet was Gabriele Rapagnetta. Nearly thirty-five years later certain detractors of the already famous poet most gleefully recalled that long-forgotten sneer in the deluded belief that D'Annunzio's reputation would suffer from being associated with such a ludicrous name, as if the historical names of Castruccio Castracane, of Bartolommeo Colleoni, or of Pisacane had in any way lessened the prestige of those who lent such glory to them.

Nevertheless, this malicious invention found its way into the newspapers, where it afforded infinite satisfaction to venomous and disgruntled readers. It was accepted at its face value, and received, strange to relate, official consecration.

All this sounds incredible, yet it is true.

This time Dame Legend met with a less enthusiastic reception on the part of the famous person chiefly involved. The Poet did not trouble to disprove such statements, with the result that ill-wishers and fools anchored their faith still more deeply in these rumours. D'Annunzio was too high-minded to take offence. "*But let us go our way,*" said he, "*like the Lombard hero.*" And that is what he did: he went his way with a smile on his lips.

All this notwithstanding, the child Gabriele was entered at the Collegio Cicognini di Prato in 1874 under the name of D'Annunzio, and was so registered when called up for military service. It was under this name that he married Donna Maria Hardouin, of the Ducal line of Gallese, on the 24th of January, 1884. Money-lenders all over the world accepted all his commitments over the signature of D'Annunzio.

But what did Dame Legend care? She did not give up her prerogative so easily. The Mayor, the priest, the Minister of War, money-lenders—of what account were they? D'Annunzio was too poetic a name, a name fit to grace the hero of a novel! It was intolerable! So, still to this day, though it may sound incredible, many people think of him as Rapagnetta. . . .

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As D'Annunzio's fame spread, so did Dame Legend direct her bitterness and spite against all the events of his life, whether negligible or important.

It seemed as though, by an obscure decree of Providence, he could do nothing that was not abnormal, or at least exceptional in her sight.

Pitiless Dame Legend did not permit him even to look like the rest of poor humanity.

His life in Rome at the time of the Byzantine Chronicle and of the famous apartment of "Andrea Sperelli" at the Trinità dei

Monti became, according to rumour (which was later to masquerade as history), that of a libertine, a sickly æsthete who walked the streets of the capital leading a greyhound on a leash and carrying a lily in his hand, as unconcernedly as an ordinary citizen carries an umbrella under his arm.

Doubts were even cast on the validity of his marriage. "Is she really his wife, or isn't she?" idle gossips were wont to ask each other.

The number of his legitimate and illegitimate children grew to alarming proportions. If Dame Legend is to be believed, D'Annunzio himself is uncertain as to the number, dispersed as are his offspring over all our planet.

From Naples, from Rome, Dame Legend followed D'Annunzio to Settignano on the heights of Fiesole, to the famous Capponcina. This was in reality the most brilliant, the most effulgent period of his literary glory.

The Capponcina, the Versiliana, the Villa delle Tempeste, the Chalet Saint-Dominique, the Hôtel du Luxembourg, the Casetta Rossa!—wonderful stepping-stones of the artist towards immortality!

This place, which witnessed the creation of the Poet's masterpieces, saw also the unfolding of his intimate life. As an immediate consequence, the most absolutely fantastic rumours about D'Annunzio assumed gigantic proportions. They flew across the world, fostered and nourished by the stupid envy of colleagues who, driven into obscurity by the rays of D'Annunzio's fame, believed that they could be revenged on him by exposing him as the champion of immorality.

The Capponcina—after all, nothing but the rich residence of a writer who, combining work with enjoyment, made money even more easily than he spent it—soon turned, in the eyes of the public, into a replica of the Palace of Tiberius. It was whispered that the dogs fed out of silver bowls, that beautiful nude women walked among art treasures enveloped in clouds of incense, while "black masses" alternated with secret and indecent rites.

Some years later a group of usurers, reinforced by some pseudo-friends of D'Annunzio (whose names, out of charity, I shall refrain from divulging), divided among themselves the

spoils of the destroyed Capponcina, under the incredulous eyes of a faithful retainer. Even *they* had to admit that the severe, albeit magnificent, residence of the Poet bore no resemblance to the imperial harem of the adopted son of Augustus.

We now come to the spacious and sober Florentine villa, surrounded by an immense and solitary park on the shores of the Etruscan Sea—the “Versiliana,” as the Poet called it. Here, according to Dame Legend, D'Annunzio modestly contented himself with galloping along the beach on a white steed, in a state of complete nudity. True, no one could be found to confirm this, not even the carabinieri, who, owing to the proximity of the royal residence, were prowling about continually with noses as long as their muskets. Nevertheless, credence was given to this rumour, for what availed it to be D'Annunzio if it meant to live like everybody else?

I would fail in my duty as an impartial biographer if I withheld from my readers the following, if fortuitous and isolated, episode of a naked lady at the Capponcina, of which I happened to be an eye-witness.

I had gone to the villa in my capacity of D'Annunzio's publisher, to consult with him on various matters. After a conversation that was mainly technical and lasted for some three hours, the Poet bade me a courteous farewell and retired, for I had to leave the same evening for Milan.

As the carriage which was to take me back to Florence was not yet in sight, I sat down in a corner of the dining-hall (it was seven o'clock, and the light was failing), and started smoking a cigarette to while away the time. Suddenly, a sound of muffled footsteps coming from the adjoining room fell on my ears, and I turned round. Faintly outlined by the light behind her, there appeared in the doorway a tall and slender woman in the scant apparel of Eve. Before I could recover from my bewilderment, this new and lovely Lady Godiva partly hid her face with her arm, a graceful and cautious gesture which, though totally inadequate to conceal her charms or her confusion, yet sufficed to preserve her incognito (which from her point of view must have been the more important of the two).

It all took place in a moment, and the unforgettable vision disappeared as swiftly as it had come.

On leaving the Capponcina, I confess that I was weak enough to question D'Annunzio's faithful servant, Rocco Pesce, who honoured me with his special friendship.

"Do you think that the lady will remain much longer at the Capponcina?"

"You mean the Signora . . .?" (his was a confiding nature, for he mentioned her name in full). "I don't think so, because she must return to Paris."

Two years later, chance brought me face to face with the lady in Biarritz, and I was introduced to her. We talked about D'Annunzio, and naturally I mentioned the Capponcina. She said to me: "I stayed there on one occasion . . . the house was marvellous . . . but what dreadful heat! I could not stand it!"

I stifled the answer: "That I can believe."

Let us now pass on to the Poet's stay in France.

Here Dame Legend suddenly adopted a more frivolous tone, becoming the complete *Parisienne*. As the Poet was the man of the hour, the idol of women, and the cynosure of the "*chers confrères*" who hated this glorious intruder, it was inevitable that the papers should publish each day some fresh news about D'Annunzio. The editors demanded it, and the poor reporters, when true anecdotes failed to materialise, were at their wits' end. It was at this time that a stupid story was circulated alleging that, after the rehearsals of *Saint-Sébastien* at the Théâtre du Châtelet, D'Annunzio and Ida Rubinstein used to recline in state in a pose reminiscent of the figures on an Etruscan tomb, on a sort of triclinium, while the minor actors of the cast filed past offering them bouquets of red roses.

A few days later, Dame Legend turned her gaze to Society. The Poet was said to have dropped a handkerchief at a private party, and to have remarked with his habitual conceit to the hostess, who picked it up: "*You may keep it.*"

The Paris newspapers daily published such tales; one might have thought their only occupation was to keep track of D'Annunzio's every gesture.

Dame Legend likewise conferred upon him, during his residence in France, that most convenient gift—ubiquity—considered till then, I believe, the monopoly of St. Anthony.

Thus, in the course of a single day, while D'Annunzio was peacefully occupying his suite at the Hôtel Meurice, one newspaper published the information that he was being besieged in his villa at Senlis by a mob of deluded creditors who had arrived from Italy; another insisted that the Poet had fled some days earlier to Geneva, where he had been seen at the Kursaal; and a third, gifted with the richest imagination of all—the “Gil Blas”—asserted that the Poet was sailing across the Atlantic in seductive feminine company.

After I had shown him these extracts, he wrote to Emilio Treves: “*I am informed that I am now on the yacht of a horribly rich and ugly American lady, who—perish the thought!—is composing a musical score to ‘La Nave.’*” And he concluded sadly: “*Oh, sweet Italy! In spite of the imbecility and the malignity with which thou art afflicted, I begin to be home-sick for thy shores.*”

Someone may ask how such fantastic tales were ever imagined.

Well, here is an example of the birth of one of them.

One day, about the middle of 1910, D'Annunzio, who was staying at the Hôtel Meurice in Paris, entrusted me with some telegrams which I took myself to the post office in the Rue Auber. The young woman behind the grille examined them carefully, and, noticing the Poet's signature, began to stare at me, convinced that the Poet stood before her in person. It was a hot day and I had taken off my hat. I should mention that I possess a very thick crop of hair.

One of the telegrams had a prepaid reply, and, in handing me the receipt, she said with a faint smile: “*Voici, Maître!*”

“*Merci,*” I replied, with my most engaging smile, leaving her under the delusion that I was D'Annunzio.

This emboldened her to remark: “What nasty tongues people have! Fancy them saying that you are completely bald! Really, one should never believe what one hears!”

We parted on excellent terms. A few days later *Commedia* published the following paragraph:

“Last winter D'Annunzio fell in love with a beautiful Roman actress, Bianca Leguardi, who refused his advances, saying that she ‘could never love a bald man.’ The author of *Victoires*

mutilées suffered greatly from this rebuff, and to-day his baldness is hidden by an elaborate wig."

* * * * *

When I assert that Dame Legend is working in D'Annunzio's favour even when she seems to do her worst, I speak with conviction. For whether she has flattered or reviled him, she has invariably helped him to ascend to yet greater heights. I will even go further and declare that the Poet is subject to the same rule as more ordinary folk, namely, that notoriety is achieved more securely through the medium of libel than through being presented in a favourable light. This explains the far greater interest evinced by the public in a criminal like Landru, the French Bluebeard, than in a benefactor of humanity like Pasteur. The latter, I am sure, did not in the whole of his life receive so many letters as Landru collected during the few months he spent in prison, and that merely because he had burnt half a dozen unfortunate women in an oven. Such is life, and we should not be surprised at its vagaries . . .

To return to the Poet, I am well aware that on two occasions he has been bespattered with mud by two rumours, totally dissimilar, yet equally ignoble. If I were to pass them over in silence I would be guilty of cowardice in my own eyes, and by lacking the courage to face them I would only add to their appearance of authenticity.

Let us therefore grasp the horns of this dilemma and confront it in a serene and objective spirit. I have always disliked touching unclean objects, but in this case it cannot be helped. Let me, then, tackle the subject boldly, trying to deal with it reasonably and objectively.

The first is of an intimate nature. It concerns the man—not the artist.

D'Annunzio is accused, not only of having treated in a cynical, ungrateful and pitiless manner certain women who have loved him, and with whom he has lived during long periods, but to have also ruined them financially. And, first among them all, there was the great Eleonora Duse.

How could such a despicable story, which has clung to

D'Annunzio—the man—like the burning shirt of Nessus, have come into being? How has it attained such notoriety? How is it that Time, that benevolent old *galantuomo*, although it has torn it to shreds, has not yet succeeded in destroying it?

One need not be a psycho-analyst to follow the reasoning of the great public, composed, for the greater part, of the envious and the scandal-mongers. Does it not run as follows? "Gabriele D'Annunzio has lived like a prince and spent his gold right and left; he has lived in complete isolation with the great dramatic artist, famous for the riches which her art had brought her, and who, moreover, adored the Poet. The 'adored one' is a man who, according to his enemies, had no use for moral scruples. Obviously D'Annunzio was kept by Eleonora Duse, and as he has always been a spendthrift, it is logical that he should by easy stages have reduced his mistress to poverty."

Presented in such terms, the argument seems unanswerable, but the contention of Gabriele D'Annunzio's ill-wishers no longer looks so unassailable when it has been thoroughly examined. Let us do just that.

After a few years of life in common at the Capponcina and elsewhere, the two famous lovers parted. For what reason? Incompatibility of temperament? A new love-affair of D'Annunzio's? Mutual satiety? The fact remains that they went their separate ways, Eleonora Duse to tread the glorious path of a great artist, D'Annunzio to follow the call of his muse. There was, however, a "but," which D'Annunzio's countless detractors feigned to ignore; namely, that, a very short time after their separation, the Poet was forced to put up the Capponcina for auction and to retire to France, metaphorically speaking, "poor and naked."

Only then did it become a matter of public knowledge that during these very years, 1905 to 1909, he had accumulated debts to the tune of nearly a million lire (a fabulous sum for that period), and this in spite of the huge sums he had earned, borrowed, or wheedled out of his publishers—one of whom, the miserable author of this book, still bears the scars which that proud position earned him.

Let us now look at the matter from the point of view of the "victim."

How did Eleonora Duse emerge from this passionate and tormented interlude?

This question can be answered in one sentence—exactly as she went into it, with her entire fortune intact. And if proof be needed, it can be found in the fact that Eleonora Duse remained in undisturbed possession of her villa "La Porzioncula" (thus named by D'Annunzio with scant respect for the Saint of Assisi), even during the calamitous days in which the hammer of the auctioneer was dispersing only a few hundred yards away the treasures of the celebrated Capponcina.

Let us now deal with the equally ignoble and persistent rumour, according to which D'Annunzio is said to have received from the French Government, during the spring of 1915, a sum estimated at something over a million francs. It was with such a sum, so it is alleged, that he was bribed to bring about, by his personal ascendancy, his intellectual prestige and his written and spoken word, the intervention of Italy in the war, and her support of the imperilled Allies.

It is a painful confession for an Italian to make, but it is beyond question that this despicable rumour can be traced to Italian circles opposed to intervention. The Latin saying, *Fecit cui prodest*, could not be more apposite.

Fanned into flame and amplified, for obvious reasons, by the Germans who at that time still resided in Italy, the rumour blazed its trail across the peninsula, while the inspired Poet was flinging his battle-cry to the four winds. And as though the aspersions cast upon D'Annunzio were not sufficiently damning, the Italian deputy, Signor Salvemini, grafted another accusation on to the first by alleging, during a parliamentary debate, that the Poet, though he had come to Italy ostensibly to pronounce patriotic orations, was in fact living with women of ill repute at the Hôtel du Parc in Genoa, at the expense of the Municipality, whose guest he was.

This accusation, however, fell flat, for, apart from the large Italian crowd which accompanied D'Annunzio to the Gare de Lyon on his departure from Paris, thousands of people who came to pay homage to him at all the stations, big and little,

between the Italian frontier and Genoa, could have borne witness to the fact that I—his humble secretary—was his only companion. Moreover, when we arrived at the Hôtel du Parc at Genoa, he and his suite (a modest suite, as I mentioned before, for it consisted only of myself) occupied but two rooms, for which D'Annunzio paid out of his own pocket, in spite of the courteous insistence of Signor Massono, the Mayor of Genoa, that he should consider himself as the highly welcome guest of the Municipality.

This dagger-thrust (I mean the accusation levelled against D'Annunzio of having received foreign money) was aimed at him with diabolical cunning, and, as Tardieu liked to call it when he was in power, at the most "neuralgic" moment—the moment when the fate of nations hung in the balance.

Would the Italians have yielded to the Poet's impassioned appeal, would they have been so ready to shoulder its consequences, if it had been the result of shameful bargaining?

Had this lying rumour been true, would the Voice of the Race have been heard so convincingly in the speech of its most illustrious writer? Would not his words have sounded shallow and calculated like the shoutings of a paid orator?

Dame Legend put forth all her efforts to lend verisimilitude to her statements during that flaming month of May 1915. Were her efforts crowned with success?

The Italians—to their honour be it said—never fully credited these allegations. Not because any proof was offered that they were infamous, but thanks to that divine intuition which is the privilege of the masses: they *felt* them to be inconsistent with reality. But this did not apply to a far from negligible section of public opinion drawn from intellectual circles and members of the middle class, who, for various reasons, had always cordially detested D'Annunzio. Calumny did not spare the Poet's supremely patriotic gesture, which he was to consecrate by the whole-hearted sacrifice of his person and his genius in the cause of war. Like a snake which it is impossible to decapitate, it reared its ugly head for close on five years.

After the end of the war this rumour was definitely disproved, for the publication of the official political documents which had

sanctioned the conditions of Italy's participation in the war on the side of the Allies revealed the actual dates on which these pacts had been signed by the contracting parties.

On the 23rd April, 1915, the military representatives of the Italian Government, and on the 25th of the same month the Italian naval attachés, agreed in Paris to the modalities in conformity with which Italy pledged herself to declare war *not later* than the 24th May, 1915. This pledge was countersigned by His Majesty the King of Italy.

It was therefore most unlikely that the French Government, which at the *end of April*, 1915 had in its hands a commitment signed by the Sovereign and the Government of Italy, would pay anyone in *May* for assistance in obtaining what it had already possessed for a month.

Dame Legend once more proved herself not only base but illogical, which is more contemptible still.

In spite of all this, those who had at first zealously welcomed and spread this story, instead of frankly owning the mistake they had made in encouraging its circulation, now tried to suggest that the story was better forgotten. At the end of the war one found numerous people ready—so they declared—to revise their judgment on this great Poet, who had shown himself an even greater hero. They grudgingly admitted that, whatever might be said of him, he had rehabilitated himself during the war. Rehabilitated? And after what obscure crime? God alone knows; I certainly do not.

How—to go back for a moment—can their scandalous statements be reconciled to the fact that on the 23rd April, 1915—that is, a few days before he left for the consecration of Quarto—the Poet (who was paid by France!) found himself in such financial straits that he wrote to me: “*I have not yet received any money from Ré Riccardi, but I believe that I shall have it to-morrow. I shall go to Genoa, and you, I think, will be able to go with me. The announcement of my return has already brought me numberless requests and dazzling proposals.*”

“*Of the first thousand lire received by the Society of Authors, they must, by contract, pay out to me nine hundred with all speed. There can be no possible misunderstanding.*”

And, some days later: “*I am without news of my money, either*

from Rome or from Milan, although I have sent innumerable telegrams. What shall I do? I can give my emeralds as a guarantee. I am nearly penniless, and Ré Riccardi's conduct infuriates me." And he signed with humour: "*Gabriele, the poor little one of Christ.*"

This was the position which the man who had "sold himself to the foreigner" was called on to face three days before returning to Italy. On his return he remained for a month at the Hôtel Regina in Rome, but found his budget so unbalanced that he was unable to settle in full the hotel bill. And two and a half years later he wrote from Venice: "*I find myself in such difficulties that I have not been able to pay the hotel.*"

On the 2nd December of the same year he wrote to me in Paris, from Venice: "*Good Riccardi must go to Paris, but he is waiting in Rome for the money that I must send him in order to retrieve my trunks from the Hôtel Regina and bring them here.*"

Ré Riccardi, the famous Italian impresario, should be distinguished from Achille, D'Annunzio's "good Riccardi," author of the *Abruzzo* and an intimate friend of the Poet's.

And in December 1918, writing to me in answer to some proposal which I had made to him with regard to literary business, he concluded sadly: "I don't know what affairs you are referring to, but certainly I am in need of money. When I left for Quarto I pawned my ring in order to pay for the expenses of the journey. The war is ended and I am plunged in blackest poverty. I have not the slightest wish to take up literary work again."

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During the period of his occupation of Fiume, contrary to what might have been expected, there was little gossip about D'Annunzio. The reason is easy to explain. The conquest of Fiume was as traditional as an epic. Amidst the gigantic conflagration which was sweeping across the world, small and flickering flames found short shrift. At that time Dame Legend partially loosened her grip on the *man*, and took delight in following the fortunes of the *hero*. She was wily enough to realise that the moment was unpropitious for slander and for malicious tittle-tattle.

However, during the last days that preceded D'Annunzio's departure from Fiume, Dame Legend, perhaps seized with remorse at the thought of having neglected her favourite by failing to concoct a single story about him, decided to fill this hiatus with a final and impressive display. And realising that it must be on a colossal scale, to match the heroism of the times, she invented the following tale.

D'Annunzio, a new Nero, had given the order, before the evacuation of Fiume, to set fire to the city, beginning with the petrol deposits. What was his intention? Was it to look down from his palace on the heights upon the wholesale destruction of the City of Life, with a lyre in his hands like the Roman Emperor? Was it to perish gloriously in the flames? Who can tell? But—Dame Legend was positive on this point—he gave the order. That, possibly in response to the entreaties of his faithful followers, the horrible crime was never committed, did not matter. *He had given the order!*

I beg my readers to refrain from smiling. I was a Legionary at the time and, like my comrades, have heard this story a hundred times—if only in a whisper—from the most “reliable sources.”

Not even after his return from Fiume did Dame Legend forsake the Poet. True, she only made casual reference to the millions which he had taken away with him, whereas actually the dispossessed King of the Carnaro arrived back at Gardone with a miserable thousand lire, which barely sufficed to pay his expenses during the first days at the hotel. At a loss for further inventions, Dame Legend took a rest and gave the Poet time to settle down at the Villa of Cargnacco. It really looked as though she had wearied of her efforts and definitely given up the chase. No such luck!

No sooner had he (with money accumulated from his copyrights) paid the Government in full for the villa which was one day to become the Vittoriale, than the good lady, tired of keeping silent for so long, once more appeared on the scene. This time she adopted a Danish costume, and assumed the tragic mien of a Hamlet. Let us turn our attention to the fact which inspired her. The house of Cargnacco was the property of Professor Thode, whose first wife had been the daughter

of Cosima Wagner and whose second one was a Danish lady.

During the war the house had been sequestered, as it belonged to a German subject, but Thode having died in the meantime, it passed to his wife. It was, however, the property of an enemy, and so put up for sale. D'Annunzio, who was already in occupation, bought it by virtue of a contract preceded by an inventory in due form. It is obvious that nothing could be brought against the procedure, which was both normal and legal!

But how could Dame Legend allow any affair relating to D'Annunzio to be regarded as normal? This transaction could not possibly be as honest as it appeared on the surface, so this is the version which she hastened to impart to the whole world.

"This famous filibuster, whose name is D'Annunzio, taking advantage of occult influences, did not only take arbitrary possession of a poor foreign widow's villa, but, not content with this, and abetted by his accomplice—the Italian Government—which trembles each time D'Annunzio raises his voice, acquired this villa at a ridiculous price, thus rendering homeless a poor little widow, whose entreaties would have melted the heart, and not only the heart of the proud emperor Trajan, but even that of the most cruel tyrant."

Finally, by the dispensation of Providence, even this legend died down and was forgotten.

D'Annunzio once more took up his artistic and literary life, interrupted by the war. His hours were devoted to writing and to meditation. He scarcely left the Vittoriale, and visitors were rare.

He received such as came with his usual courtesy, showed them round the villa, and invited them to lunch or dinner, as the case might be.

On less formal occasions he wore a dressing-gown cut on the lines of a monk's habit. It should not be forgotten that, as will be seen later, D'Annunzio had a predilection for the Franciscan habit.

"Look," he would say jokingly, "*I have changed myself into a perfect ascetic; in fact, I lead a life of solitude and mortification.*"

I am served by 'Clares' . . ." And his guests, at least those who were not complete fools, smiled amusedly at the harmless flight of fancy.

Not so Dame Legend, who was continually listening at key-holes; these strange words, "ascetic," "Clares," "mortifications," did not fall on barren ground. She rubbed her hands and immediately launched into fresh flights of imagination.

"This time D'Annunzio has gone completely mad; he is turning into a monk, submits to privations of every kind, and can be seen walking through the house, like Henri III of France of gentle memory. Nevertheless, he has not renounced women, and surrounds himself with—NUNS! The villa is a sort of convent and he may be seen walking down its corridors at orisons, followed by 'Clares' carrying tapers . . . poor D'Annunzio!"

This Franciscan story was also encouraged by the fact that on the 19th September, 1922, still convalescent from his fall out of a window of the Vittoriale, he betook himself to the convent of Maguzzano, where he passed a whole day and where he was photographed in the midst of the Friars.

And while Dame Legend was thus winging her way out of the Vittoriale, the unsuspecting and innocent D'Annunzio, having slipped out of his habit and donned a dinner-jacket, was sitting down to dinner like any other country gentleman entertaining guests at his hospitable table. But that modest picture, though it happened to be the true one, was too ordinary to satisfy the unappeased hunger of the sensation-mongers.

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Neither has D'Annunzio been spared a grave accusation as a man of letters. This charge was fairly circumstantial, and took ten years to die a natural death. It concerned his supposed plagiarisms and, if it is to-day forgotten, it flourished more than forty years ago, at that happy period of Italian history when some stupid brawl at a café in Rome or Milan had a stronger grip on the popular mind than the loss of a colony or the destruction of a city by an earthquake.

The man who brought this charge against D'Annunzio was

an obscure poet. The vehicle of the calumny was a weekly paper, *Il Capitan Cortese*, a distant forerunner of those later arrivals, *Fiere Letteraria*, *Candide*, or *Gringoire*.

It was this semi-social, semi-literary paper of Milan which suddenly launched, like thunder out of a blue sky, the terrible indictment, the "*J'accuse*" which was intended to end for ever the artistic career and the fame of D'Annunzio.

According to the author of these articles, D'Annunzio was nothing but the vilest and the most shameless of plagiarists. His most renowned poetry, the most famous pages of his novels were copied word for word from foreign poems and novels.

For two or three weeks the author of the articles endeavoured to collect proofs of the crime: not very convincing ones, it is true, either taken individually or in their consistency with each other, but quite sufficient to bring joy to the souls of all the brilliant failures in the literary profession. And he promised that the finishing stroke would be delivered a few weeks later.

Sure enough, after a couple of weeks' silence, there appeared in the by then famous paper a powerful article containing nearly twenty columns of D'Annunzio's collected plagiarisms.

This time the admirers and friends of the Poet trembled in earnest for the reputation of their idol. This was no longer a question of the petty theft of two or three lines, for entire pages of D'Annunzio, and amongst them his most beautiful ones, were printed side by side with identical foreign texts.

It was even no longer a question of plagiarism, but of deliberate and shameless robbery, organised by D'Annunzio at the expense of a pleiad of more or less well-known writers, French, Danish, Dutch, Russian, Finnish, and goodness knows how many more—the whole, as I say, accompanied by original texts, titles of volumes, names of publishers, and dates of publication.

The mass of the public was stricken with dismay. The evidence of the delinquency, the precision of the accusation were such as to distress even the most staunch and uncompromising partisans of the Poet. The literary scandal defied description. The silence of the accused confirmed the conviction of his guilt.

One week later it was revealed that a gigantic hoax had been perpetrated. With a view to immunise D'Annunzio for ever against the attacks of the little reptile that had attached itself to his heels, several literary friends of the Poet had drawn up a complete list of foreign authors, titles, dates and publishers, and, pretending to bring a definite contribution to this campaign in favour of literary integrity, had sent to the paper the fruit of their inventions. And the paper, only too happy to lay hands on this formidable and gratuitous material, had fallen into the trap. Investigation proved that there was no relation between D'Annunzio's work and that of the authors mentioned.

Nevertheless, there was still a great deal of talk about the Poet's pseudo-plagiarisms. The rumour was fostered by the envious, and had far-sounding echoes, that have died down only after years.

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On one occasion only was Dame Legend thoroughly paid out for her slanders concerning D'Annunzio. This happened at a moment when, drunk with the facile successes of her calumnious campaign against the Poet, and having outrun every sense of discretion and of decency, she took it into her head to spread the report that he was dead.

On the 15th November, 1880, there appeared in an unimportant periodical, *Movimento Letterario Italiano*, the following obituary notice:

"Gabriele D'Annunzio, a young poet who has already made his name in the republic of letters, fell from his horse as the result of a sudden attack of giddiness a few days ago on the road to Francavilla, and was killed on the spot. He was about to publish a new edition of his *Primo Vere*."

As you see, no detail was missing: the date, the manner of his death, the place.

And a little later, *Capitan Fracassa*, a Roman daily paper, embellished the paragraph under the signature of Ugo Flores, in a literary style dear to the epoch:

"On the road that leads to Francavilla, stricken by sudden

vertigo, there fell from his horse, never to rise again, Gabriele D'Annunzio, the last-born of the Muses. Around him, beneath the infinite azure sky, spread the Tuscan hills, graduating in tone from an intense green colour to a smoky cerulean."

I spare the reader most of the lyric exuberance of Ugo Flores, inspired by such deep emotion that it even made him place the Tuscan hills on the road to Francavilla!

" . . . To die at seventeen!" Flores' emotion added a year to the age of the Poet, who at this time was only sixteen. "To die at seventeen . . . with neither distrust nor scepticism" . . . etc. . . . And so on for another half-column, not, of course, forgetting to mention the "crushed violet," or Tarquinius Superbus, who slashed off the heads of the tallest poppies with his staff. In a word, the lyre rang out a heart-breaking threnody.

But if Dame Legend found it comparatively easy to persuade the public that D'Annunzio was born on the *Tartan Irene*, and that his name was Rapagnetta, it was impossible to assert for any length of time that he was dead, the more so as the sixteen-year-old Poet, unlike the good Negus Menelik, whose death was reported with such unwavering regularity, lived a by no means secluded existence.

D'Annunzio walked, ate, drank, rode, visited friends and enemies and, above all, paid court to a considerable number of fair ladies, many of whom would have been ready to vouch for the fact that he was most definitely alive.

This is the only time that D'Annunzio ever worsted Dame Legend. For him the consequences were comparatively light. He was merely ordered by his parents to give up riding, for they regarded the announcement of his death as a warning of Providence.

D'Annunzio, as usual, disregarded the order and determined to become an accomplished horseman, an object which he actually became.

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I have now dealt in detail with the more insistent legends directed against D'Annunzio, and trust I have sufficiently exploded them. Envy of the successful is the natural reaction

of those who have failed, and the public is so indiscriminating that it will swallow the most fabulous accusations against the famous, especially in those circles where conversation must be nourished by slander if it is to survive at all. When will Dame Legend abandon Gabriele D'Annunzio? Probably never.

CHAPTER IV

THE POET AND THE FAIR SEX

D'Annunzio: "Amator Carnis"—An extraordinary document—A mysterious occurrence in the Palace of Fiume—"Like Goethe, I must stifle my sensuality"—A delectable stray cat—D'Annunzio loved for himself alone—Blondes—The mulattress—D'Annunzio's inventive mania.

IF we seek a logical explanation of many strange events in D'Annunzio's life, such as his unforeseen decisions, his inexplicable renunciations, his improvised journeys and his periods of mysterious isolation, we can do no better than to quote his own words: "*If only I could have banished women from my artistic life, I would have written—not forty books—but a hundred!*"

It would be absurd to deny that women have had a fantastic influence on the life of D'Annunzio or that they complicated his existence with perpetual and haunting persistency. They caused him to postpone decisions and to break engagements; kept him from his work whenever possible; wrought havoc with his opinions and his plans; wheedled him into erroneous judgments, estranged him from his friends when they imagined them to be professional procurers, ever ready to lure him into new adventures; intercepted letters in which they suspected information detrimental to their interests; exasperated him by displays of mad jealousy; upset him by weeping, fainting and feigning illness; weakened him physically by inflaming his masculine vanity and exacting indisputable proofs of love—in a word, women have been dominant in D'Annunzio's life.

So reluctant has he always been to admit men into his intimacy that he actually has difficulty in writing a casual letter while his closest male friend sits reading in an armchair on the other side of the room. Yet he has sometimes tolerated the presence of a woman, curled up at his feet with her head pillowed on his knees.

Sex began early to be a prevailing force with him. It reached the height of its ardour in Rome between 1879 and 1885. Some called this period his "merry age" and others his "sensual crisis." At all events, it has never relaxed its hold on D'Annunzio. Recalling these crowded hours in after-years, he wrote:

"I was ill with the disease called 'women.' Had I been received in a monastic order, I must have confessed that my soul lay under the yoke of concupiscence."

In all justice to the Poet we should not forget that, in those days, to be loved by a beautiful woman, to "conquer" her, was the chief ambition and the all-absorbing preoccupation of every man between the ages of sixteen and thirty. D'Annunzio himself wrote during this epoch: *"Nowadays the laurel serves but to entice the myrtle. The veritable royalties of an author are his love affairs."* And again: *"As an author one is primarily concerned with posterity, but as a man one seeks to crown one's triumph in the embrace of two beautiful arms."*

If D'Annunzio was the infant prodigy of poetry, he was even more the infant prodigy of love. At fourteen he had made discoveries in the realm of Eros of which many fathers of families are ignorant at sixty. He found that *"A woman's mouth can be bitten like a luscious fruit"*; and he assures us that he made many other more valuable and more secret investigations *"with an intoxicated shudder, a reckless abandon."*

I am convinced that he has retained this feeling to this day, and that it has never lost its overwhelming fascination for him.

We are, then, face to face with an exceptional lover, the classical *amator carnis*, as Saint Bridget called Clement VI, or, in more current language, a ladies' man before whose exploits the most dashing Don Juan must bow his head in admiration.

"The flesh is holy," he proclaimed in his first book of verse, which appeared when he was sixteen, and four years later, in the *Intermezzo di Rime*, he asked: *"Who will give me a sixth sense?"* We can only conclude from this that the senses God gave him and which he has employed so extravagantly have never been adequate in his estimation.

In his youth he had confronted himself with this difficult question: *"One woman, all women or no women?"* He had answered

it unsatisfactorily: "One—is to kill desire. All—is to be a satyr. None—is to invoke grave consequences." This settled nothing. But D'Annunzio was capable of solving this apparently unsolvable problem. He has possessed neither one woman, nor all women, but a great many women. Thus has he escaped the "grave consequences" which he seems to have feared.

Women, like so many roses, are literally strewn along the winding path of his life. If we except those books which deal with war, his writings are from the pen of a refined, ruthless and prodigal lover, all of whose weaknesses and enthusiasms are carried to the extreme. Such is the ascendancy that women exercise over him, that he invariably prefers the company of the most insignificant women to that of the most intelligent men, and no reasoning prompted by affection or sentiment has ever caused him to forget the appeal of sex.

Assuredly, he is thinking of himself when, in his novel *The Intruder*, he makes Tullio Hermil, who resembles him so closely, say: "*Through the light silk I saw far more clearly the smooth softness of her breast than the palpitation of her heart.*" The woman whom the hero is holding in his arms is his own wife suffering the pangs of maternity. Still, had Gabriele D'Annunzio been in Tullio's place, I doubt whether he would have seen the beatings of the heart at all.

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Even in his jests it is ever obvious that what D'Annunzio covets most in a woman is her body.

Many years ago he was supping after the theatre with a woman of transcendent beauty and with two friends, the one a famous sportsman and the other a diplomat accredited to the Holy See.

For two solid hours D'Annunzio, as has always been his habit, made frantic, frenzied love to the lady. By the time supper was over and when a considerable amount of champagne had been consumed, the young lady agreed to sign a love pact with the Poet. He drew up the document and copied it with his own hand on officially stamped paper. The sportsman and the diplomat, ready accomplices to this pretty pleasantry, affixed their signatures as witnesses. Here is the text:

"The undersigned, healthy of body and of mind, hereby swears to belong from head to heels and in all the living provinces of the flesh to Gabriele D'Annunzio, her tyrannical Lord, and to obey him in all his wishes, even up to and beyond the effusion of blood, from this day until the end of her life.

"Rome, this twentieth of May, 1908.

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I say without hesitation that the Poet has always been defenceless before feminine seduction. When he has desired a woman—and the more so if she did not cede too quickly—he has been capable of altering all his plans and even of postponing most important business.

His rare voyages have, almost without exception, been made to satisfy the wish or the whim of some woman or other. When he went to Egypt after the failure of his tragedy *La Gloria* in 1899, and when he visited Austria, it was only to please Eleonora Duse. His departure for France was due not only to the intolerable situation in which his debts had placed him in Italy, but also to the persistent entreaties of a woman with whom he was in love at the time and who persuaded him to go with her. When, after some months, he left Paris to settle at Arcachon, it was again a woman who found for him the villa which he inhabited for four years.

At Fiume, during an extremely delicate political crisis when the population, influenced by Croats and other dissident minorities, seemed to be losing heart, D'Annunzio, heedless of the cheering of the crowd outside and the entreaties of his most faithful supporters to show himself on the balcony of a house, refused flatly to comply. Why? Those who were present and in a position to know will never forget. A beautiful creature, by whose side the Poet was sitting and of whom he was enamoured at the time, had forbidden him to move by a look and by ironical words. The windows giving on to the balcony, which had been thrown open by the Legionaries, were closed at his order.

Referring once again to Fiume, his collaborators had not failed to remark on more than one occasion a very curious fact. The salon in the Government Palace, where D'Annunzio

received important personages and where secret interviews took place, communicated with his private apartments. It was evident to everyone that there was always a listener behind that door, and that that listener was a woman. The best proof is that, from time to time, D'Annunzio glanced furtively in the direction of that door, and frequently reduced his voice almost to a whisper. It is clear from this that D'Annunzio considered the presence of the eavesdropper as dangerous, but that he was powerless to eliminate it. Assuredly it was a woman!

I could go on indefinitely enumerating similar examples. But let D'Annunzio himself convince us that he was distinctly aware of his weakness. He wrote: "*Sentiment makes cowards of us. The strongest of us tremble in the folds of a skirt. The loftiest aspirations of a noble mind perish at a breath from the mouth of the beloved one.*"

In 1893, writing to his friend Scarfoglio, he confessed: "*I am enfeebled by love, by the pleasures of love and by the habit of living a horizontal life.*"

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On the other hand, if women have exercised a debilitating influence on his will-power, they have nevertheless remained indispensable elements of his creative work. For once the demon of the flesh is calmed, tamed even by the possession of a woman, he is able to work and to produce—something which has always been utterly impossible while he has been troubled by unsatisfied or disappointed desire. He said to me one day: "*Like Goethe, I feel the need of killing sensuality.*" Allow me to add that he has spent his entire life killing sensuality. He is killing it even now—at seventy!

Ordinarily, when hazard puts a pretty woman in his way, even if he is in the most deplorable state of mind, he immediately recommences to regard life through rose-coloured glasses. From Arcachon, where he had been condemned, by the departure of a woman, to a few days of solitude, he sent to me in Paris a desolate letter, and shortly afterwards, because he had discovered another pretty lady who had received his advances gracefully, he wired: "*I have been to the charming village of Andernos. Despite the wretched weather I am feeling infinitely*

better. *I have found a most delectable stray cat.*" How many "stray cats" have come and gone in the life of Gabriele D'Annunzio?

He affirms, only in theory of course, that: "*There is a sort of spiritual sensuality which in no way affects the body. There is a voluptuousness so subtle as to have almost no organic repercussion. Few,*" he maintains, "*understand that the luminosity of a shoulder, the polished curve of a stomach which maternity has not deformed, the visible palpitation of a breast, the quasi-fluid length of a leg, the perfect arch of a back can profoundly charm certain men without arousing their desires.*"

Yes. D'Annunzio proclaims all this and more. But were he to be frank with us, he would add that he himself does not belong in that select category.

Sensual to an exasperating degree, both physically and mentally, he knows no bounds and permits no obstacle, moral or material, to thwart the prompt gratification of his desire.

He confessed to me that, one day, chancing to be in the music room of the Vittoriale with two women, the younger of whom was divinely beautiful but was unfortunately under the chaperonage of her companion, he was seized with so violent a desire to be alone with her that, acting upon inspiration, he deliberately upset a cup of tea on her dress so that he might invite her into the next room to properly dry her skirt.

To indulge an ephemeral caprice, he has never hesitated to endanger the reputation of a woman, the happiness of a family, the future of another man even when he has been tied to one or all of them by the bonds of time-tried affection. In the presence of the woman he fancies, he becomes animally and divinely devoid of conscience. His psychic and physical state is so evident—I may as well say brazen—as to make one want to smile. He cannot conceive of a woman repulsing his advances. But here I must make it clearly understood that he does not feel that she should yield because he is Gabriele D'Annunzio but because, at that precise moment, he wants her terribly, and it seems to him that his wish should be granted promptly and completely.

"Once," he confided to me one day, "*I had the rare joy (it is*

the unique case in all my life) of being loved for myself alone, for my physical qualities and not because I was Gabriele D'Annunzio, a famous man. I was passing through Bologna, where I visited the book shop which Carducci loved so well. As I left it I noticed a fascinating girl, and having nothing in particular to do, I entered into conversation with her. After having walked with her beneath the porticos for possibly an hour, I succeeded in persuading her to accompany me to a hotel to rest a little. The delicious child, having gazed at me in amazement, had one of those strokes of genius which only women are able to summon up at critical moments and which permit them to respect their principles without depriving themselves of whatever pleases them. 'I would not think of accepting your invitation,' she informed me, 'but for the fact that I have the impression of having known you for years.'

"The 'rest' lasted two hours. When she was tired of 'resting,' she got up and began to roam about the room. She stopped before the table where I had left my watch and chain, to which was attached my Deputy's medal. I was terrified when I saw her twist the medal between her fingers and finally stoop over it to read my name. 'Murder will out!' I thought. She looked up and asked me very simply: 'Why did you tell me your name was Gino delle Rose when it's really Gabriele D'Annunzio?'"

"Having remarked that she had had some difficulty in reading my true name, I said: 'Oh, I don't know. I just happened to think of it. But, tell me, do you know Gabriele D'Annunzio?'"

"'No,' she replied in the most innocent way imaginable. 'Why should I know him? I like you; I don't care anything about the name. In fact, of the two I prefer Delle Rose; it's so much more poetic.'

"I took her in my arms, and kissed her passionately. I don't believe that a kiss of mine has ever carried with it so much sincere gratitude."

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D'Annunzio has never had a special or exclusive predilection for blondes, brunettes or red-heads; for tall or short women; for authentic ladies or for their maids. However, certain facts would tend to show a very slight preference for blondes.

One of his first loves, almost in childhood days, was inspired

by a little peasant girl. She was fair and he called her "Splendore." "Calcinella," of whom he sings the praises in *Primo Vere* under the name of Lilia, has hair of that "*leonine colour through which there seems to shine a flame of gold.*"

"What are you doing now, beautiful blonde?" he wrote to her a few years later.

The one woman whom he was not content merely to love but whom he carried off and married was divinely blonde. "*The blonde girl who stands in the shadow of a marvellous white feather,*" he wrote when he had admired her by the side of her mother, the Duchess of Gallese.

Three of his most enduring loves were inspired by blonde women whom he has baptized Amaranta, Niké and Donatella. When, at the age of twenty-three, he dedicated a few lines to the colour of women's hair, this is what he declared (in a decidedly light tone, it must be said):

"*Considering that our mother Eve was blonde, that the goddess Venus was also blonde, that our gracious Queen Marguerite of Savoy deigned to choose this colour,*

"We decree:

"1. *That, though individual taste permits of the greatest liberty with regard to colour, blonde is the only colour which is officially recognised as being in good taste.*

"2. *That no matter who she is, any woman who is not blonde may become so.*"

That is not all. In the notes he jotted down in the course of his travels, we find indications which confirm his tendency to favour blondes. Here is one which was written in 1900 when he went to Vienna:

"*In the streets of Vienna one encounters fleshy blonde women who drag their powerful posteriors almost on the ground. A confused impression of material pleasures.*"

And, a little further on in the same notebook, we come across: "*Blonde as the women of Palma Vecchio. One cannot imagine a woman more blonde.*"

On the other hand, some of his mistresses were brunettes—very dark brunettes, in fact. The first woman he ever loved (if it is permissible to apply this phrase to a couple where the man, Gabriele, was seven and the woman eight) was little Linda, the

daughter of a Marquis. "*It seems to me that I can see your brown head through the shutters,*" he wrote to her five or six years later in a moment of tenderness.

"Smikra," as the Greek name indicates, another woman he loved for a long time, had very black hair and an olive complexion. "Coré," likewise, had coal-black hair. And there are many brunettes.

He is completely eclectic in his amorous tastes; to such a degree, in fact, that one of his mistresses was a coloured woman. He had, for this admirable mulatress, whom he had known because she had acted in *Saint-Sébastien*, and who died in London under mysterious circumstances, a weakness which all but developed into a genuine passion. I think with horror of what might have happened had the white lady, who fondly believed that she held the Poet's heart in her small hand at the time, discovered the *Coin d'Orient* on the Boulevard Montparnasse where D'Annunzio followed eagerly in the footsteps of the great Baudelaire.

To sum up: he takes what comes his way. The essential is to "take." He is always hungry, always lustful, always ready. When his body fails to respond, his mind intervenes, and one may well ask how the woman fares who, out of curiosity or timidity, strives to resist him.

Taking the testimony of several women, I deduce that, in such circumstances, the sole defence is a dose of irony and humour, mixed in exactly the right proportions. No feminine weapons go so far to baffle D'Annunzio.

On these rare occasions our cunning D'Annunzio regains his self-possession as if he had taken a cold shower and proceeds to conduct himself as a perfect and indifferent gentleman. He gives up the struggle and qualifies the unconquered lady as complicated, irritable or unmanageable, unless he is thoroughly disgusted and puts her down for a stupid fool.

Like all the celebrated "collectors" of women, of the genus of Casanova, D'Annunzio, in the moment of desire, promises the woman whatever she asks, even though he knows quite well that, a few hours later, he will be in the arms of another. He has been known to promise to write a masterpiece in which his new flame will be immortalised, or to propose marriage as soon

as he can obtain a divorce from his wife. These masterpieces have never been written, and he has never contemplated divorce, except when he has been in a boudoir with another woman. His promises are fantastic; and he makes them with such sincerity and with such persuasive arguments that most women accept them confidently. Without wishing in the least to take away from Gabriele D'Annunzio's exceptional power with women, it must be said that the woman who exposes herself to attacks of this sort is invariably prepared, if not to face the supreme consequences, at least to listen to a passionate declaration and to submit to uncontrolled advances.

"Whoever goes to the mill," so runs the proverb, "though he may not cover himself with flour, is none the less prepared to do so."

Various are the sorts and kinds of women who have desired to enter D'Annunzio's "mill." There are the superior women, the inquisitive women, and the little wild geese.

In the course of his long series of amorous adventures, D'Annunzio has wrought havoc in all three categories. He has sometimes burnt himself at this dangerous game, but I shall find space elsewhere to treat of these famous conflagrations. But, in the vast majority of instances, it is the woman who has been burnt or badly singed.

There is one great consolation: the woman who approaches the flame is certain to be rebaptized with a special name by the Poet, for that has become a tradition with him.

"What is your name?" he always asks when he has been alone with a woman for five minutes.

And she tells him that she is: Marie or Maud or Kitty or Constance, or what you will.

"Really?" says the Poet. "Well, from now on you are to call yourself *Donatella—Isa—Notivoglio—Cinerina—Meliadusa—Nidiola—Chiaroviso—Basiliola—Nectarine—Trivellina—Gigliola—Pivetta—Barbarella—Coré—Sirocchia—*"

I may almost say that this mania for inventing names was born with him. At the age of ten he baptized one of his first loves, the daughter of a mason of Pescara, "*Calcinella*" because whenever he saw her she was covered with lime. It is very rare that the name does not offer a facile explanation as in the

following cases: Boccadoro ("Golden Mouth"), Consolazione ("Consolation"), Nigra ("Black"), Chiomadoro ("Golden Hair"), Sirocchia ("Little Sister"), Notivoglio ("I Don't Want you"). Nectarine refers to the velvety skin of the woman in question. Buonarrota served for a woman of plastic perfection, of the Michael Angelo type. Cinerina, or Cinderella, was for women who favoured black and grey (he also gave this name to a dog). Melitta served for a woman with a particularly sweet disposition. Niké was a woman of a domineering personality. Arachné was for a woman who spun her web around him with great cleverness. Trivellina suited admirably the temptress type, and Nidiola (from *nido*, meaning "nest") applied to dimples in the cheeks.

Many of these names he took from books he was writing or had already produced.

For D'Annunzio the woman who was worthy of receiving a truly special name from him entered automatically into his kingdom, into his sphere. From that moment she could boast that she belonged to a very select order of which, of course, D'Annunzio was the sole male member.

It was most unusual for him to give a name in jest, and I recall no case where he rebaptized a woman who failed at all to interest him.

As these ceremonies always took place at the very outset of the Poet's relations with a woman and consequently at a time when he could not foresee where these relations would lead, there are doubtless dozens of women who possess the special name but have never gone beyond this first and, surely, innocent formality.

Although D'Annunzio, with his inexhaustible imagination, would have gone on indefinitely inventing new names, it frequently occurred that he applied the same one to several women, at different times and even simultaneously.

This revelation of mine may cause retrospective suffering to some of the celebrated women who are proud of D'Annunzio's baptism, but I cannot conceal the fact that I know at least six Donatellas and an even larger number of Nidiolas. As for the Amarantas, they are countless. Eleonora Duse was the first of the Amarantas, but heaven only knows who is destined to be the last.

During his sojourn in France D'Annunzio was wont to use the nickname *brother* for his women friends. Previously he had called some of his mistresses *sister*, probably to enhance, with a vague savour of incest, his own sensations.

He wrote, at the later moment, in the *Trionfo della Morte*, speaking of his spiritual brother, Giorgio Aurispa, the hero of the novel: "*The hereditary lust once more exploded with invincible fury in that delicate lover who delighted in calling his mistress 'sister.'*" He had written a few years before, in *L'Intrus*: "*I thought that voluptuousness would have the savour of incest.*"

What is odd about all this is that D'Annunzio has never been willing to be loved as a brother when he had had another attitude toward the woman in question. And—shocking admission!—he first expressed this objection when he was nine years old in a letter to a little friend: "*I nourished for you a sort of pious, affectionate and delicate respect. Often I admired your body with the appreciation of an artist.*" Turning to the end of the pages, we find: "*You say that you love me as a brother. No! No! Not as a brother! No!*"

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Returning to the years he spent in France, we find that these appellations had the inestimable advantage of never giving rise to excessive apprehensions in the minds of the women to whom they were applied. Even the author of *The Dead Town* does not call a beautiful and desirable woman *Brother* or *Sister* without somehow pledging himself morally not to allow his affection to surpass the bounds of fraternal intimacy.

I would not be so bold as to deny that, often and intentionally, with all the tranquillity of the Pharaohs, he celebrated temporary nuptials with the sisters of his choice. In so saying, I put my finger on no one instance, for, when we lived at Arcachon, affectionate telegrams, signed "Brother" or "Sister," were continually arriving, and we were both frequently at a loss to determine the identity of the sender, so numerous were the brothers and sisters the Poet had left behind in Paris. D'Annunzio went to the station more than once to receive one of these charming brothers in skirts without knowing, until he saw her,

which one had signified her intention of arriving. This was a source of great amusement, because D'Annunzio, like a pigeon-shooter, never knew which box would open first.

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Happily for the women in D'Annunzio's life, we are not all of us cut from the same pattern and, though certain impossible men and equally impossible women will insist that true love comes but once, the Poet, who never has been and never will be a one-woman man, has declared with admirable wit and psychology that: "*We always believe that our first love is the last, and that our last love is the first.*"

By habit as well as by temperament, he has always lent a romantic character to the most banal affair. Though it lasted but a few days or even hours, the adventure was never lacking in what, for him, are obligatory ceremonies. Therefore there were nearly always letters which, when the caprice grew to a love, became very numerous.

"Ah!" D'Annunzio said to me one day. "*If only I had all the letters I have written to my mistresses! And to think that, after my death, they will probably be sold at outrageous prices and published! I regret, above all, that I haven't those I wrote to Isabella Inghirami. There were hundreds of them, and they would make a pretty little volume. You will see. They will be published some day, if they get into the possession of an unscrupulous individual.*"

Isabella Inghirami is the name he gave the woman who inspired him to create the heroine of *Forse che sì, forse che no*. He regained possession of these letters, and had me make a single typewritten copy which he entitled *Solus ad Solam*. At one time he contemplated publishing them and even conferred with Treves, the editor, on the subject.

Apart from letters, the Poet attached infinite importance to flowers and other little gifts and to preliminary meetings. But flowers appealed to him principally.

This reminds me of an interesting episode. Finding himself in Paris in 1911, D'Annunzio rented a *garçonnière* in the rue de La Boétie; it so happened that I was occupying an apartment in a house across the street. I knew that, on the day in question,

he was to receive, from five to seven, a young and fascinating Frenchwoman, the issue of that impetuous nobility which had distinguished itself several centuries before in the battle of Nicopolis.

Desirous of avoiding a meeting with the Poet and, more particularly, with the lady, to whom I had been presented a few days previously, I left my house at about half-past three. I would have refrained from looking in the direction of the house across the way had not my concierge, who, true to the tradition of the Parisian concierge, was standing in the doorway conversing amiably with some friends, exclaimed for my benefit: "Monsieur, just look at those flowers! They must be either for a wedding or a funeral!"

Fate willed it that the concierge should be doubly right in her supposition, for, only a short time after, it became absolutely impossible for the descendant of a noble line to see D'Annunzio under similar circumstances.

It is unusual for the Poet to go to the home of the woman in whom he is interested even when he knows that she is at perfect liberty to receive him. He prefers to have her come to him. In February, 1931, he told me: "*I cannot fix a rendezvous with a woman outside the Vittoriale. That is, I could, of course, but if I did, I would sacrifice my privileged position of a sorcerer, surrounded by my philtres and my incantations. Only here can a woman forget my age. As it is, I am an extraordinary individual in exceptional surroundings, whereas, elsewhere, I would be but a libidinous old man.*" And this has always been the case, because he has never failed to recognise that all of his homes have been admirably adapted to love-making. When peculiar conditions have rendered it inadvisable to receive at home, he has created a temporary home for the purpose. I have particularly said "created" rather than "rented," because he has never failed to transform the place to suit his taste or to conform to the possible exigencies of the case. And he has never ceased to repeat: "*I cannot love in mediocre surroundings.*"

Rugs, richly-bound volumes, *objets d'art* and cushions are always taken to the scene of operations a few hours before its consummation. Flowers—roses by preference—are arranged in carefully selected vases and the apartment is sprayed with

whatever perfume the Poet chances to fancy at the moment. A tiny incense-burner is never overlooked.

If I seem to dwell with undue insistence on what appear to be trivial details, it is because each of them has its indirect importance if we are to know D'Annunzio's amorous psychology. Furthermore, no one of them has ever been omitted for many years, and this seems to me to prove that he has always embarked on his adventures as ceremoniously as he might have attended a religious festival.

Very, very exceptionally, when he has found himself in a strange town or city, he has had recourse to the hospitality of some friend. Among the many honours which his friendship has conferred upon me, I had the privilege of lending him my *garçonnière* in Milan. It was in 1903. He frequented it with assiduity for about a month. Correct in this as in all things, he requested the key in his purest style: "*I would appreciate it if you would lend me that beautiful piece of forged iron. I shall require it to-morrow, Friday, at half-past three. Thank you.*"

When an unexpected scene caused the rendezvous to be postponed or definitely annulled, he never failed to advise me in good time. "*Dear Tom,—The fury of this afternoon is unyielding. I return the precious object in its virgin form.*"

But when events progressed to his utter satisfaction, he allowed me to share his triumph with these words: "*Dear Friend, I have accomplished the secret rite. I render unto you my marvellous gratitude. Gaudeamus igitur.*" Or: "*Here is the key to Paradise.*"

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Patient and meticulous with regard to every phase of life, Gabriele D'Annunzio is equally so with regard to love. Rarely did his amorous adventures require the intervention of a tried and trusted friend. But if an illness confined him to his bed, he sought assistance.

This occurred in Venice in 1916 when, as the result of an accident while flying in the service of his country, he found himself temporarily blind. Being anxious about the imminent arrival of a woman, whom, of course, he could not meet at the train, he wrote to me: "*No news. Please meet the noon train. I*

am waiting impatiently. Order a gondola with two men.—Gabri."

Once he was comfortably installed in the apartment where his chosen one was certain to join him, he was quite capable of waiting two or three hours with the apathy and obstinacy of an Eskimo who, harpoon in hand, watches for the seal beside the hole cut in the ice.

During these periods of anticipation, it has ever been his habit to put on a dressing-gown, carefully selected for the occasion. There are always at least two kimonos at the disposal of the lady. It is most unusual for him to offer the classic tea. Instead, he never fails to have an ample provision of cakes, pastries and candies, one or two choice liqueurs and quantities of perfumed cigarettes which he, himself, would never dream of smoking.

Transparent shades dim the lights until the room is almost dark.

In the winter the heat is invariably intense, almost suffocating, as is ever true of D'Annunzio's habitations. The windows of the love-nest are hermetically sealed. All his life the Poet has abominated noise and too much light and, when he is to interview a lovely woman, he is doubly exacting on these points.

He has possessed *garçonnières* in all the cities where he has sojourned for any length of time. Returning home from one of these rendezvous, he is in a frame of mind which harmonises exactly with the results of the interview. Speaking purely physically, he never fails to bring back with him a ravenous appetite. It is more difficult to describe the expression on his face. It is not quite that of the son and heir who has just succeeded in kissing the maid in the hall, nor is it hardly that of the honest tradesman who has just made a profitable sale. Perhaps it is that of the cat which has swallowed the canary, feathers and all. In any event, if things have passed off pleasantly and in conformity to his wishes, he is unable to hide his satisfaction.

Hardly ever does he return from one of his trysting-places in a sentimental or poetic mood. It is equally extraordinary for him to note on paper his impressions of the adventure. Here is the exception which will serve to prove the rule:

"My mouth biting the white flesh of your shoulder thought it was chewing a bitter laurel leaf."

Strange words these in which are confounded D'Annunzio's two greatest goals—love and glory!

* * * * *

One thing is undeniably certain, and that is that D'Annunzio, returning from a sentimental encounter, is absolutely convinced of the truth of everything his newest mistress has seen fit to tell him.

Abnormally suspicious and sceptical about life in general, he becomes naïvely credulous and enthusiastic and ends by blindly believing the woman's every word because it flatters his masculine vanity and adds to the value of the conquest. The most ordinary little woman may, thus, become, in his estimation, an interesting, complicated and exceptional creature for no other reason than because he has "discovered" her. Like Pygmalion, he falls in love with his own work. The woman, no matter who she is, afterwards undergoes a radical transformation. He models her and reconstructs her according to his image. All the exterior forms, the mannerisms, the affectations and the habits of the Poet become hers with that astounding rapidity of assimilation given to monkeys and to amorous women. Readorned, morally, with D'Annunzio's veneer and, physically, with original gowns which he presents to her when she cannot afford to purchase them herself, the new mistress enters into a period of tranquillity. At last she is the titular of that envied office.

For how long?

It is extremely difficult to determine the probable duration of this exceptionally agreeable occupation. (I have only quoted the words of many of the favourites.) It depends partially on the place where the love is born and raised, and also on the kind of life the Poet chances to be living at the time.

By virtue of one of the very nearly unbreakable laws of love, we know that the longer love lasts, the longer it is likely to last. D'Annunzio's greatest loves have lasted a few days for his heart and a few months for his body, except when habit has caused them to linger on for years. If man is a creature of habits, D'Annunzio is assuredly the king of men as far as love is concerned.

When a woman succeeds in installing herself under

D'Annunzio's roof, she becomes, if I may employ the term, a part of the inventory. All of his homes have had their châtelaines. Had he always lived in the same house, he would doubtless have had but one—official—mistress. Happily for him, he has inhabited, in the course of his career, a quantity of houses. Otherwise his present mistress would be approximately his own age, and that, if I know D'Annunzio, would neither amuse him nor appeal to his æsthetic sense.

Although each of the many homes has had its châtelaine, the lord and master has nevertheless practised infidelities within its walls, but they have always been of an ephemeral nature. After a few desperate efforts to escape on the part of the Poet ever countered by a stubborn resistance on the part of the official mistress, these revolts have been put down. D'Annunzio bows to the decree of fate and ceases to struggle. He walks about with his head bent low, and the escapade is forgotten.

This goes a long way toward explaining the strange indifference with which D'Annunzio has frequently abandoned a house where he has lived for years. The sensation of freedom regained, of a new existence opened up before him offsets his sadness at leaving behind him quantities of objects and habits which have been a part of his life and his work. Nearly all of his departures have coincided with the irrevocable rupture of a liaison. Rarely has the mistress followed him and, when she has, she has not insisted very long, for the charm has been broken.

As to those women who, still in love with him, have let him go, I pity them with all my heart! For nothing in the world would bring back to them this man for whom those absent are invariably wrong.

There have been, in the history of the Poet, affairs which, logically, should not have endured two weeks, and which have dragged themselves out over a period of years for no better reason than that D'Annunzio detests travelling—even the shortest distance.

How many times has he complained to me of the ball and chain riveted to his ankle: *"Just see how unfortunate I am with women! It is impossible for me to spend one fleeting night with an actress, a great lady, a demi-mondaine or the most ordinary kind of woman without her proposing, the next morning, to run away with*

me, to abandon whatever she possesses, to give me all her life, all her soul, all her body FOREVER! It is a curse! With me, women can never think of anything but the tragic and the sublime, and they transform themselves—alas!—into oysters which cannot be extricated from their shells! How I envy you! You are not famous, and so you can enjoy simple flights of fancy!"

One day he proclaimed that *"to be loved without loving is to eat without hunger and to drink without thirst. It is a thousand times preferable not to be loved, just as it is far worse to have indigestion than to fast for three days."* He even went so far as to implore in poetical form the death of a young woman whom he felt he could no longer love: *"Ave Maria. Oh! Merciful Mother, make Her cease to love me! Make Her cease to love me or make Her die! Take that ferocious love from her heart, Oh, Mother of Mercy, and deliver me from these bonds I wear!"*

But one must not get the impression that, from the minute a woman was installed in the house of the Poet, the rhythm of his life was altered as is the case in nearly all the households in the world, whether they be legitimate or not. The new mistress simply became the most beautiful object in the home, and was only distinguishable from the countless works of art with which he has always surrounded himself by the fact that she was the only modern work of art.

No châtelaine of his has ever had the right to change the place of a piece of furniture or of an object, of advancing or retarding a meal by five minutes or of engaging or dismissing a servant.

One day at Gardone, in 1929, he entertained a young Spanish lady from Central America. She pleased him immensely, but he found her too vivacious and extremely dangerous for his bibelots. Writing to me on the subject, he qualified her as *"a restless little monkey,"* and he added: *"Her presence has served to convert the Vittoriale into an isolated ward of the lunatic asylum of Monbello. I am melancholy, and not one bit content."* In another letter he described her more fully and humorously: *"She is a barbarous woman, sprung from one of the most savage of Mexican tribes. With her lynx-like bounds, she continually endangers all my precious objects which I love so much. Despite my painful anxiety, I have not as yet summoned up the courage to chop off her head or, at least, in*

accordance with the sanguinary rites of her own country, her four gesticulating and leaping extremities—Hark! A noise—doubtless, she has smashed a Persian vase. Alas!”

Whoever the woman may be, D’Annunzio remains the absolute master of his domain. Never does he solicit her advice.

It may be said that the woman reigns (a dubious reign at best) over the soul of the Poet only during that period when he is courting her. To arrive at his ends, he will make no matter what concession, provided that it does not interfere with his inviolable habits. Once he possesses her, he remains courteous, attentive and the most agreeable of companions, but he resumes anew the rôle of absolute despot of his own existence.

I feel sure that I have definitely destroyed in a preceding chapter the vicious legend which accuses D’Annunzio of having reaped material gains from certain of his mistresses. I should likewise establish the fact that he is not over-generous with women. Extravagant by nature, he is, but in this one respect, if not frankly mean, at least extremely prudent.

If he frequently makes presents to women at the outset of a liaison, they consist of insignificant things such as *bibelots*, perfumes and autographed books. Sometimes, when the liaison assumes a quasi-legal aspect, he gives the traditional birthday present. He does not consider even this as in any sense essential, and does not necessarily bother with it himself. Here is an example:

“X’s birthday is on the twenty-first,” he writes to me. *“I am sending you five thousand francs to buy a pretty bit of modern silver in the style of the jeweller Lalique, or a pendant or a ring or a brooch. I rely on your good taste.”*

But when it was a question of providing necessities, of giving a woman a monthly allowance, of handing out thousand- or even hundred-franc notes—in a word, of supporting the best-beloved—D’Annunzio almost invariably put his foot down hard, and I am convinced that his refusal was prompted by pride rather than economy. In these later years, having settled down to a quiet, routine life, he has, like the husbands of the world, sighed and paid.

Theoretically speaking, he has never believed in paying cash for anything unless for an occasional libertine hour when even

the Poet's imagination has not been able to summon up an illusion. And, in these rare cases, he has always been generous to the point of extravagance, employing the same procedure as in giving lavish tips to inferiors.

In this rather delicate particular, he resembles the late Shah of Persia, who, in Paris towards the end of the last century, literally threw gold and jewels at the women with whom he passed a few hours of an afternoon and sadly neglected the wardrobe of the mistress with whom he lived, on a marital basis on the strange pretext that she should be contented with the extraordinary honour of being the favourite of a Shah!

D'Annunzio was capable of falling in love with a woman whom he had courted for a quarter of an hour and he proceeded to send her a burning letter or a bouquet of flowers the following day, only to drop her forty-eight hours later for the friend or the sister to whom she had imprudently introduced him. That necessitated another barrage of letters, flowers, promises, rendezvous and, of course, the inevitable abandonment.

But since it is by no means always easy to leave a woman, the Poet has been known to carry on three or four desperate affairs simultaneously without the slightest regard for the possible tragic consequences and to his great amusement.

His aptitude for polygamy has never ceased to be prodigious.

He had barely arrived in Arcachon from Paris when he gave me these four telegrams to dispatch:

1. "*Signora X, Paris. Arrived to-day in my new villa where I am preparing a room for you. The weather is perfect. Au revoir. Gabri.*"

2. "*Countess M, Paris. The melody of the waves cradles my regrets. Everything is distant and everything is near. Au revoir. The Exile.*"

3. "*Madame B, Paris. I am thinking of you every minute. Ariel.*"

4. "*Madame H.R., Paris. I am thinking of you as of the richest bronze for my future statues. Do not be sad. Au revoir. Au revoir.*"

And the best and the worst of it is that a fifth lady was already making herself at home in the villa!

* * * * *

Quite recently, on the Lago di Garda, and despite the Poet's advanced age, two rivals for his favours met. Infinite precautions had been taken to no avail, and, artful prestidigitator though he is, the bigamy was too flagrant to hide.

He has admitted to me that, whenever he finds himself in such a dilemma, since all defence would be ridiculous, he contents himself with burying his head in his hands, assuming the sorrowful attitude of a man who has been visited with an irreparable misfortune, and allowing the two women to fight it out between themselves. He intervenes only if they come to blows. "*But,*" he has assured me, "*that has happened but very exceptionally in all my experience. Happily, the most exasperated of women are reluctant to show themselves in an unfavourable light to Gabriele D'Annunzio.*"

Many women have accepted their humiliation philosophically, and have even regarded it as a matter of course. It is extremely difficult to hold an eel in one's hand, and D'Annunzio is one of the most wriggly, slippery eels imaginable. Wise women have accepted this fact in time, and have relinquished the more brilliant rôle of mistresses to become simply friends. Thus have they been placed "*on the reserve,*" and the Poet has called upon them from time to time for manoeuvres, for, if he has never been completely conquered by a single woman, he has never entirely slipped away from one.

To these "*reservists,*" ever indulgent in their attitude, he complains bitterly of the physical and moral shortcomings, of all the absurdities and manias of those who are on active duty. His tone is pathetic, and he loudly proclaims his despair at having destroyed a divine past only to replace it with a mediocre present. The woman listening, hypnotised by this persuasive eloquence and flattered in her vanity of ex-mistress, loses all control and frequently abandons herself to a new hope which, alas, is but the prelude to disillusionments still more bitter.

Countless times, women who have been subjected to it have raved to me about the irresistible magnetism of D'Annunzio's words and voice when he is intent on an *amour*. And I have remarked it personally more than once. It is difficult to explain exactly what he tells these women or how he tells it. The fact remains that he always gains his point. Sometimes

he exercises a power which seems positively supernatural.

One day he repeated to me what a certain woman said to him: "*There are moments when you speak and when you put your whole self into your words. Then you have the mouth of a faun and the expression of a demi-god.*"

I was present on an occasion which bears out everything I have said. D'Annunzio and I, with some friends, were in a Montmartre night-club. In those days all the *boîtes* had their special number, and at the Restaurant Pigalle it chanced to be a dancer who interpreted rather than danced one of Chopin's waltzes. She had a lovely figure, and the Poet followed her every movement not only with the eyes of an artist but those of a man. When she had finished her performance, D'Annunzio invited her to join us and poured out some champagne. In complete ignorance of his identity, she sat beside him and listened attentively to the words, accompanied by timid caresses, which he whispered to her.

At first she replied from time to time with short phrases spoken in a low voice. Then she became silent, threw her head back and listened with haggard eyes. I was very close to them, but the music prevented me from catching even the subject of the conversation.

Suddenly the woman uttered a cry, freed the Poet's hand which she had been holding in both of hers, rose to her feet, staggered and swayed and finally fell in the middle of the room. The usual excitement ensued, and was drowned out by a vigorous performance by the orchestra while the woman was carried into an anteroom. There she was left alone with D'Annunzio, and they were at liberty to settle their differences—if any.

Half an hour later the Poet and the dancer rejoined our table without attracting any attention. "All's well that ends well," the *maître d'hôtel* remarked as he filled my glass. "Your friend must be a hypnotist." "No," I informed him, "he is only a poet." "Ah!" exclaimed the disappointed gentleman as he put the bottle back in the bucket. The incident was closed until the bill was presented, and we found: "Private room—300 francs." The poet-hypnotist has never forgotten that evening. It is not the 300 francs which engraved it on his memory, but the fact

THE POET AND THE FAIR SEX

that he lost a personal belonging to which he was greatly attached. The next morning he sent me this note:

"Dear Tom. Yesterday, in the course of those grievous manipulations, I lost a cuff button—an amethyst surrounded with diamonds. See if it is possible to retrieve it from beneath the infamous divan with the aid of an adequate tip."

But the infamous divan refused to divulge either its secrets or the amethyst.

* * * * *

Contrary to what his acts, his writings and his declarations may lead one to suppose, D'Annunzio is exceedingly jealous when a woman inflames him and for as long as the fire lasts. He admits that this is a grave error. He says, in fact: *"There are intellectuals who know quite well that feminine fragility is incurable. But this knowledge does not enable them to relinquish the hope that their own particular women will remain constant and faithful unto death."* The Poet is jealous even of the past when he did not so much as dream of the existence of the object of his future passion. In theory he pretends that the woman he possesses has never belonged to another, and that, once she has belonged to him, she will never belong to any one else even if he abandons her. The truth is that the mere idea that the opposite may be the case awakens in him a violent disgust.

Of course, his jealousy is more evident when it concerns a woman living under his own roof. Whether she likes it or not, she is doomed to seclusion, and it is very rarely that she is permitted to appear at a social or official function.

Generally speaking, the Poet's fair prisoners have never complained of this severe régime because they have heard the echoes of their glory through the walls of their gilded prison, and because they have been aware that, to sally forth in search of pleasure in the company of their idol, was to run the risk of an immediate infidelity on the part of the lord and master.

* * * * *

Which particular feminine type does Gabriele D'Annunzio prefer, physically and morally speaking? This question can only

be answered theoretically, for, as I have pointed out, he has never been difficult or exclusive with regard to women.

Physically, like all short men, he worships the long, tall woman, the modern Venus, the mannequin type. The Greek Venus and the Roman Venus are too corpulent for his taste. Heavy women simply do not exist for him. I recall no instance of a really fleshy mistress. However, he is rabid in his condemnation of the pains to which the modern woman goes to reduce her weight, and he never fails to cite as a sad example the sudden death of his great friend, the Princess of Castagneto, who died as the result of a treatment she followed. In this respect he agrees wholly with Mussolini who, in his famous speech to Italian doctors, asserted that the fashion of being thin weakened the race.

He is very severe in his judgment of legs and feet. He wrote that a woman had pleased him "*because she had legs of an elegant length like the Salome of Filippo Lippi.*" As to clothes, he has a predilection for Directoire style robes. He insists that a woman should be high-waisted and he has always detested those styles which tend to lower the effect.

He told me jokingly one day that nearly all women's legs were three inches too short, and that the perfect woman should measure five feet six inches at least in her bare feet so as not to be obliged to wear mules with high heels on intimate occasions.

He likes small feet, but not to the point of being microscopic. Without going to the extremes of Holophernes, who lost his life because he allowed himself to be seduced by small slippers (the Bible says: "*et sandalia ejus rapuerunt oculos ejus*") he greatly admires pretty shoes and, if he finds a woman badly shod, he at once proposes to remedy the situation.

"*I beg you,*" he wrote me from Venice to Paris in 1916, "*to find me a pair of lady's slippers of gold cloth or brocade. The prettiest to be had. Achille Richard, who is bringing you this letter, knows the size. High heels, gold or coloured.*"

On another occasion and for another woman, he sent me the following instructions: "*Buy a pair of evening slippers in gold lamé. They should fasten with straps behind the ankle. If you are unable to get them in gold cloth, white embroidered with gold will have to do. Here is the size. Good taste.*"

Hands, if they are to please D'Annunzio, should be interesting, sensitive, tapering, those of a pianist. He wrote on this subject: "*I do not like soft or pudgy little hands.*"

He has a preference for warm, deep voices.

He admits that bobbed hair is attractive, but he retains an adoration for long hair. From the artistic point of view the feminine headdress has always interested him.

After a visit to the Baths of Diocletian in Rome, he took these notes which he asked me to copy:

"In another little hall, all the types of headdress. A diadem of curls perforated like a beehive. One gets the impression that the bees make their honey in these holes, thus lending to the hair the colour of honey.

"The headdress of the epoch of Augustus, with a parting in the middle, thus dividing the tresses as they fall down over the neck.

"The headdress of the time of Septimius Severus with bulging 'bandeaux' covering the ears and framing the face (Botticelli).

"The undulating headdress of Lucilla which hides the forehead and imitates the waves of the sea.

"The headdress of Julia Mammea, parted in the middle and drawn back above the ears, which hold it up until it falls down over the neck (something Christian).

"The headdress of Sabina, raised from the neck to the top of the head and divided by a diadem (Venus).

"All the forms which constrain the fluid richness of feminine hair."

He attaches vast importance to the mouth, of which he never fails to speak when he describes a woman. For instance: "*A mouth so succulent, so richly red that one wondered where she had found so much blood in the centre of that pale face.*" When the opportunity presents itself he never fails, as he offers a piece of fruit to a pretty woman, to beg her to bite into it because he pretends that he can determine immediately whether she is cold or sensual. "*She ate fruit with that provoking sensuality which accompanied all her gestures*" (Giovanni Episcopo).

He likewise lays great stress on the perfection of the breasts. He said one day to a young woman: "*You are my type of ideal beauty. Nothing is more seductive than a young branch bearing fruit which is just a trifle heavy.*" And he once declared to me,

very seriously, no doubt to excuse himself for having a rather mature mistress: *"Sometimes, towards the age of forty, the breasts of a woman seem to bloom again and become hard and firm like those of an adolescent."*

He is no admirer of make-up. He declares that a woman's complexion should be uniform like a beautiful slab of marble. He is slow to admit the charm of the slightest touches given to the eyes and lips.

He adores pale women. The first young girl whom he kissed upon the mouth was not only *"a great lover of perfumes, a great reader of romantic novels and a terrible mocking bird when melancholy did not turn her mockery into a sigh,"* but who had *"a face which, from beneath her tresses, made me think of those great magnolia blossoms which the florists sell intact, wrapped in leaves and tied with a straw."*

Lalla, whose praises he sings in *Canto Novo*, is also pale. He calls her: *"The white child of Fiesole."*

Of certain women of the ephebic type with close-cropped hair, he approves. But he said to me one day: *"One of Mallarmé's most beautiful prose poems is that in which the author describes to two 'bourgeois' of the year 3000, a splendid type of woman of the year 2000—a woman with marvellous long golden hair. I find that one of the most beautiful pages of Mallarmé."*

The modern woman, if we mean by "modern" the sporting woman—the motorist, the aviatrix, scoffing at danger, flirtatious, fond of bridge, despotic and flighty—may amuse D'Annunzio for a moment like a toy, but he does not consider her interesting. His tastes take him rather to the voluptuous, indolent and sensually complicated woman—the woman of Baudelaire.

The only sport of which he thoroughly approves for woman is horse-riding. All the others get on his nerves and, if it depended on him, no woman would ever be allowed to practise them.

According to D'Annunzio, a woman attains physical perfection somewhere between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. He remarked to me one day: *"It is easy to see that I am still young, for that schoolgirl, pretty as she is, does not intrigue me in the least."* He dared to say this in 1929. He explodes his theory

whenever the occasion arises. This was particularly true when he was in France, an ideal country for the feminine sex, because women only commence to be considered worthy of attention at thirty-five and celebrated women consider it their right to be adored until they are seventy-five.

The Poet said to me laughingly of a Parisian adventure of this kind: "*I believe that I should be credited with extenuating circumstances. The love of Madame X is, so to speak, an official love. One receives her historic caresses in the same state of mind as when one receives the Legion of Honour. I assure you that, as I climbed down from her bed, I had the impression of having slept with the Council of Ministers.*"

The fact that D'Annunzio began to have mistresses when he was scarcely more than a small boy gives rise, to-day, to situations as unexpected as they are tragi-comic. On occasions he finds himself, when not in the least prepared, in the presence of respectable ladies in their sixties who consider it quite natural to throw their arms around his neck and to call him: "My dear!" They embrace him passionately by virtue of a right long since acquired—perhaps fifty years ago! It is useless to try to describe his expression when one of these phantoms hoves in sight unless we conjure up a condemned man who sees the outline of the guillotine rising up before him.

To desert the physical for the moral and the intellectual, I am forced to state that, in D'Annunzio's estimation, feminine honesty and morality are secondary qualities at the best. As far as morality is concerned, it suffices that the woman in question is not unfaithful to him. For the rest, little does he care. She may be utterly useless in the home, she may be hopelessly capricious, she may take drugs, she may be totally lacking as to character and honesty, she may even forge his signature on a cheque—none of those things matter. What he does insist upon is that she must be sensitive, that she must have as little will-power as possible, and that she must be pretty and seductive. "*What tyranny is a woman's beauty!*" he once wrote to me, citing a fourteenth-century text.

It is of scant importance to him whether his mistress is intelligent and cultivated or not. He can live for years with the stupidest woman on the face of the earth. He detests above all

the feminist, the pedant and the authoritative type. When he says that a woman is "interesting," one must not be deceived. That merely implies that she possesses, in his estimation, amusing sexual complications—nothing more.

When he writes: "*The spiritual woman is of a nature infinitely higher and nobler than the material woman,*" when he affirms that "*the romantic woman occasions more disorder and more sin than if she practised publicly the profession of immodesty*" and that "*never by the pure and simple gift of her body will a woman sow the harm which will spring up beneath her feet if she has been exalted by the reading she has done,*" D'Annunzio is most certainly not speaking for himself. For him, the woman need only be delicate and supple, and know how to adapt herself to his habits and his desires. He told me one day: "*The most indigestible woman is the one who is called cultured. A woman should possess nothing but sensibility. Eleonora Duse, for example, was not an intelligent woman. She was capable, after having first read one of my tragedies, of finding one of Tommaso Gallarato Scotti's tragedies beautiful and, after having first read my poetry, of waxing enthusiastic over poetry by Borgeese—But she was gifted with great sensibility.*"

He could not endure a woman with what he called "*bourgeois*" tastes. This is what he said of a charming Jewess who was his mistress for a short time: "*Yesterday she revealed herself to me in a new aspect. Never in my life have I known a more magnificent courtesan. After a few cups of champagne, she had moments of veritable sexual folly, of savant voluptuousness. At last I understand why there exists in this world a gentleman who spends more than a million a year for her. It is a pity that, this morning, she considered it absolutely necessary to send me a letter with the classic phrase: 'What must you think of me?' Jewesses never lose that 'bourgeois' background.*"

D'Annunzio detests jealousy on the part of women. Of course, he has never been able to avoid it, but he has only tolerated it, as a sort of stimulant, at the very beginning of a liaison. At that stage of the affair, he calls it, for a reason I have never understood, "*tiripiti*." One day, when he was unable to leave his hotel in Paris because of a scene of jealousy, he wrote to me: "*That terrible misfortune known as 'tiripiti' has fallen on my head. It will be impossible for me to join you this evening!*" The

jealousy of a mistress becomes frankly intolerable when he is tempted by a new caprice. And if the mistress does not wish to be abandoned, she must find the courage to transform herself into an accomplice, and not only assist at the birth of this new love but even favour it. For if she acts in this manner she retains a reasonable chance of conserving the title and the prerogatives of *official mistress*.

In my capacity of secretary to D'Annunzio it has often devolved upon me to paint, sincerely and completely, this picture for a woman who had come to me to be informed as to him and as to his habits. The reader will agree that the picture, as I have painted it, is anything but reassuring for the aspirant to the title of Egeria. Still—and I hasten to add this, regardless of the social status of the woman who has interrogated me—her response has been invariably:

"Well, when are you going to introduce me to Gabriele D'Annunzio?"

CHAPTER V

D'ANNUNZIO'S OPINION OF HIMSELF AND OF OTHERS

"I am a bad Poet!"—"My dear colleagues"—D'Annunzio and the dead bodies of his enemies—A dull book—The giant and the pygmies—Sappho and Alcæas—An artless journalist—D'Annunzio and the greatest Italian poets of his lifetime—Verses by a post-office clerk—Gentle imbecility—A serious mistake of Victor Hugo—D'Annunzio, Pierre Loti and Anatole France—The smallest feet in France.

CONTRARY to what might be supposed, D'Annunzio has rarely judged others, but has frequently judged himself, and—an even more incredible statement for those who have only known him by hearsay or through the medium of the usual noxious legends—while he has always been severe towards himself and his work, he has, except on very rare occasions, shown indulgence towards all, or almost all, other artists.

But we shall return to this subject later on.

Let us see, to begin with, what is his opinion of himself, of his own intellectual value and of his literary output. And thus we shall be able to convince ourselves that, even in this field, his true mentality is little known and is entirely different from that generally attributed to him by the public. D'Annunzio's first literary criticism of himself goes back to the years of his early youth. We find it in two letters written by him in 1879—that is, when he was sixteen years old—to a friend at Milan, Signor Cesare Fontana—letters about which we have already spoken, and shall speak again. This judgment was written and signed by D'Annunzio. It was authentic, and since it is far from flattering, we must consider it as perfectly sincere.

He speaks to the distant friend about *Primo Vere*, his first book of verses, consisting of three barbaric Odes, one of which is dedicated to Fontana. "*You ask me for my verses. I am most anxious to grant your kind request; they are nothing much! I have poured into them the whole of my ardent soul: there is an exuberance*

of sentiment which expresses itself in impudent hymns, in suave elegies, in fulgent images, in bizarre or languishing sounds; but do not search for the spark of genius which thunders and sends forth lightning which strikes and carries one away. . . . Oh, that genius is not mine, for the spark is lacking."

In another letter written five months earlier than this one, there is another brief but significant allusion: "*I am a bad poet and an intrepid narrator of dreams.*"

Generally speaking, it is difficult to find a poet, even one devoid of exaggerated pretensions, who will declare, especially in writing, that he does not possess the divine "spark." No one demanded this declaration from D'Annunzio. It was, to say the least, superfluous, the more so since it was made to an intimate friend, and especially when we remember that in the same letter he was requesting the same friend to find him a publisher.

The two passages which I have quoted represent, therefore, an incontestable proof of modesty very rare in a poet.

These, however, are not his only admissions.

In a letter dated April 1881, to another friend, Signor Biagi, to whom the young poet had confided his hopes, D'Annunzio alludes to the rather unfavourable opinion formed of his first book of verse, and refers to reviews of it published in the newspapers.

"These criticisms do not annoy me, and I read them as serenely (of that, at least, I can boast) as if they concerned someone else. What does annoy me is that I do not know with whom to agree. One says that my descriptions are marvellous, another that they are affected and dull; one that my outline is stupendously varied, another that it is as regular as the surface of a sphere; one—Nencioni, for instance, that I have a rare and divine gift of poetic vision, another that I absolutely lack a sense of art; and so forth. You will understand that I am a little disconcerted. Nevertheless, courage and 'on-wards.'"

In 1895, writing of his projects to Michele, he expresses himself as follows: "*After the hubbub that has been raised in France around my name, I might easily have allowed myself to be tempted by vanity. Instead, I came to Francavilla. I shut myself up in a lonely house on the sea-shore, and I have worked for eight months at a book which is certainly not fated to reap popularity,*

and which I consider as my first one. Those which preceded it are mere exercises and preparations. Plus ultra!"

If I have considered it interesting to quote these extracts it is not because I am convinced that on their own merits they would constitute a definite proof of the severity and serenity of judgment exercised by D'Annunzio against himself, so much as to correct the general impression created by some of the attitudes which he afterwards adopted. The former, nevertheless, represent, undeniably, a good starting point.

On the other hand, it would be childish to suppose that the man who, some years later, focused on himself the interest not only of all literary Italy but of all other nations, would persist in doubting his personal value, already recognised and consecrated by the world's plaudits. He wrote, in fact, a few years later to Treves (who, in spite of his vaunted editorial flair, had not yet realised that D'Annunzio was a Triton among the minnows of his firm): "*You must concede to me at least this, that there is a certain difference between the effort needed to write a book like Le Vergini delle Rocce and the surely far greater one needed to write La Baraonda or La Maestrina.*"

However, if he went step by step winning glory and, with it, the consciousness of the heights to which he had scaled, the general lines of his character and of his temperament did not change; that is to say, he remained identically the same, always severe towards himself and his work. His Italian enemies and competitors, on the contrary, always, especially at the beginning, tried to spread the impression that he was arrogant and boastful—in a word, an unsympathetic "superman." They had a free field for two reasons. The first was that all those who, like D'Annunzio, possessed a retiring nature and loved peace appeared arrogant in the eyes of the multitude; the second was that though those who broke down the walls of the seclusion with which D'Annunzio always liked to surround himself invariably found him simple, affable and modest, they were, unfortunately, too few in number to be able to destroy the stupid and widespread myth of a vainglorious and conceited D'Annunzio.

In 1888 he wrote to the Editor of the *Tribuna* in the following terms: "*According to many I am an obscure and artificial poet. These rhythmic poems which I send you seem to me smooth, of a*

gentle flow, and easy to read. And in this, at least, they correspond to the general character of art."

In 1889 the first chapter of the *Trionfo della Morte* appeared in the *Tribuna Illustrata* under its first title "L'Invincibile."

D'Annunzio wrote on this occasion to Vincenzo Morello (Rastignac): "*It is a coherent book, but it will be understood by very few.*"

Everyone knows the *Trionfo della Morte*. Is it not a proof of modesty and moderation for one who had conceived its 492 pages to call it merely a *coherent book*? It must be noted that D'Annunzio wrote this to Morello, a dear and faithful friend, with regard to whom there was no reason to hide or belittle his legitimate exultation at having created a work whose immense value it was impossible to ignore.

"*I am working, I think, well . . . I believe that I shall write something beautiful,*" he wrote to me in 1905 from the Capponcina with regard to the *Vita di Cola di Rienzo*, and some years later, in 1912, after having written the last word of that marvellous book, *Contemplazione della Morte*, he wrote: "*I finished not long ago a small book Contemplazione della Morte, and I am really tired.*"

In 1913, still from Arcachon, he sent me a letter to Paris, referring to the first scene of the third act of the *Pisanella*, the manuscript of which he had sent me to re-copy. He said amongst other things: "*I am sure that you will be susceptible to the freshness of the first scene.*"

This unexpected modesty on D'Annunzio's part revealed itself not only in his judgment of his work but also in his admission of the difficulty which he encountered in creating the work itself.

He has never belonged to the army of those (and they are recruited as well among the ranks of successful as of unsuccessful artists) who wish to create the impression, each time they seize a pen, a brush or a chisel, that a masterpiece, as though by divine inspiration, leaves their hands. True, he has sometimes admitted that there was something mysterious in the mental process that accompanied his creations. Typical of this impression is a passage from the *Pisanella*, which I have already quoted: "*I felt no weariness while the terrible urge kept me going,*

but now I am truly exhausted and ought really to rest. But I cannot do so.

"What you say about the mysterious virtue which has dictated my creation is true. It is inexplicable.

"One of the enchantments of my tormented nights lay precisely in that ineffable flow of words that came to me.

"And note that at the rehearsals every sentence was supported by a famous text.

"From a technical point of view this comedy is superior to the mystery." The "mystery" to which he refers is *Saint-Sébastien*.

But on another occasion when he was composing the *Vita di Cola di Rienzo* he confessed, on the contrary: "I believed that I could write *Vita di Cola di Rienzo* with ease, but I was mistaken. This sort of prose is extremely arduous; it is necessary to condense laboriously a mass of historical material and to place one's personal imprint on the art of biography. I am working desperately hard, yet, up to this evening, my pages are few."

At another time in 1906 (after I had told him of my intention to publish in a review which I was editing some of his sonnets dedicated to Rome) he wired: "Those sonnets are colourless. Perhaps I would do better to send you a scene from the Nave. Let me know."

And this is the so-called "vainglory" of the "superman" legend!

* * * * *

How does D'Annunzio judge his work?

Which of his works does he prefer? Has he ever disowned any of them?

It has never been easy to determine what D'Annunzio thinks of his own work, the more so as his opinion varied according to whether he speaks to one man or another and he is even influenced by the weather in forming an estimate.

To get close to truth, I must, therefore, choose amongst his declarations, not those which were determined by special circumstances, but those others which he has expressed daily in the course of our friendly conversation.

Generally speaking, D'Annunzio is not only a severe judge of what he has written, but, at times, he may even be said to have disowned many amongst his works. Let it be understood,

however, that he has never repudiated his artistic responsibility. He has simply ceased to care for them and cynically appraised their merits. For D'Annunzio, anything he has written or published, or a play which has been produced, virtually ceases to exist. He only lives, thinks and hopes with regard to the work he is at the moment composing. It alone he loves; of it alone he speaks to friends and followers. On it alone does he seem to build his future glory with any certainty. In a word he lives entirely for it.

"You shall see what I have written! You shall see what I am preparing! Even you, who know me so well, will be astonished!" These have always been his expressions when in the throes of creation.

In a sense, he displays for his work the love which some female animals have for their progeny—intense, almost savage affection for the period which elapses between their first steps and their maturing—after that non-existent. The most gentle, the most loving bitch will dislike—nay, attack and bite—a puppy she has carried in her womb if she meets him a few months after he is weaned. It is so that D'Annunzio acts with regard to his work.

One day, speaking of his less recent productions, he said: *"I am like those princes of the Renaissance who liked to keep close by them the immured bodies of their enemies."*

This sentence portrayed perfectly his real state of mind! The visitor or the friend who speaks to him of his early work and thinks that he is paying him a compliment by praising it, is looked upon by D'Annunzio as a bore and a man without taste. If his admiration dates back to such remote times as to include one of D'Annunzio's very earliest productions—as, for instance, *L'Innocente*—the Poet's opinion of him sinks to even lower depths. His astonished glance seems to say: "How is this? But you don't know a thing! What can you see of D'Annunzio in *L'Innocente*? What an idea to talk to me about all these antediluvian things! Haven't you read what I have written since?" It is the same with his photographs. Unlike the lovely society ladies and singers who persist, when they are fifty, in presenting to their friends and admirers photographs taken when they were twenty, he never gives nor writes a dedication on any book or photograph that is antiquated.

If anyone has the bad taste to ask him to sign any such book or photograph he throws it into a corner and replaces it with another of a more recent date.

Only a few of his works, like *Laus Vitæ*, are exempted from the rule, but it must be remembered that he considers the *Laus Vitæ*—"the most perfect fruit of my prose."

Talking of literature one day to some intimate friends at Fiume, he uttered the following words:

"The *Laudi*—they are my most beautiful work!" and he added with a smile:

"Contemptuous Frenchmen would doubtless be surprised to hear me say myself that one of my works is beautiful. But I know how to distinguish what has a right to the epithet from what hasn't. Many of my books I would burn with pleasure—all my first novels, for example. Why, then, should I not give to the best the praise that is due to them? In doing so I am only discarding an affectation of modesty which is no more than a social convention."

As a rule, he thinks more highly of his poetical works than of his novels. To Henri Bordeaux, who, on being introduced to him in Paris, was loud in praises of his prose, telling him that he was a great novelist, D'Annunzio replied with a malicious smile: "Yes, that may be, but I am a far greater poet."

It sometimes happens that D'Annunzio forgets his own verses. One day in jest at Arcachon, I wrote a sonnet to a lovely lady, inserted five or six verses taken verbatim from *Poema Paradisiaco*, and then presented the composition to him asking him to revise and correct it for me.

He set to work at once and modified three of *his own* verses, not noticing the deception. But there was an even more startling incident.

When the *Figlia di Jorio* was produced in 1926 in the gardens of the Vittoriale, which provided a grave and harmonious setting, D'Annunzio, who probably had not re-read it for twenty years, not only displayed intense emotion in viewing it as a spectator but proclaimed it as "*the great song of a race*." Moreover, he had forgotten it to such an extent that when Forzano, who was supervising the production, showed him a few days before the performance the scene of the first, the second and third acts, D'Annunzio asked: "*and the fourth?*" He believed in perfect

good faith that the tragedy had four acts. I leave you to imagine the stupefaction of those present.

One should not forget that his criticisms are often of a jocular character and mirror that humour which, although it may not be visible on the surface, always slumbers in him. Thus, when he made a present of his book *Il Venturiero senza Ventura* to my daughter, he wrote the following dedication: "*To Nerina, this book which is a half-baked brick, but none the less bears the name of one of the Graces.*" This volume is dedicated to Aglaia. It would be pointless to take these words at their face value. Nevertheless, in one who knows the sum of human stupidity as well as he does, it is a certain proof of courage to have written these lines which, had they fallen under the eyes of some ill-wisher, might have been used against him as a proof of pose or cynicism. And in case the reader should find this statement superfluous, here is an actual incident: I was telling a well-educated woman of the best Italian society that D'Annunzio, speaking of the fact that his works had been translated into all languages, had added, whimsically: "*It is time they made up their minds to translate them into Italian too.*" She answered seriously: "*To say 'translate' is perhaps an exaggeration, but an edition with explanatory notes would be extremely useful, because his Italian is certainly very much 'sui generis'!*"

Out of respect for the truth, I must admit that from about 1923 or 1924 his public and private pronouncements regarding the value of his work have assumed a less reserved and modest character.

We find various hints of this tendency in the *Faville*. "*Never had it seemed so precious to me, that gift set by nature behind the frail structure of my brow.*"

"*More than once, writing openly about myself, I have written too in praise of myself with no hesitation whatsoever.*"

Also, in his private conversation with his intimates it has become more natural to him to sing his own praises.

"*I look at my work with the eyes of our descendants. I am my own descendant.*"

And again:

"*My Phœdra is Homeric in form and language. It is not one of those works of merely Greek origin like the Polyeucte of Corneille,*

or like some of Goethe's works, which are Greek only in the sense that Canova's statues are Greek."

And in a volume of the *Laudi* presented to a French friend:

"To X.Y. this book of poetry of all times and of all countries."

When he granted permission for the printing of the *National Edition* of all his works in September 1927, he signed "*Gabriele D'Annunzio, intoxicated with himself.*"

It seems therefore evident that for some time he had been evolving in a new direction.

Even when he is jesting, there is always an undercurrent of subtle complaint that his work is not constantly lauded to the skies, and that he is a discarded deity, and though he says this mockingly he yet manages to infuse into it praise of himself and of his creations.

In 1929, in answer to a letter in which I had said that his preface to the *Pisanella* was so voluminous as to constitute a book in itself, he wired to me from Gardone:

"You were right in thinking that I have written a book. In fact, I have written a most beautiful and complete book of 400 pages in the best French of France."

I must in truth record that he has never spoken so much about himself or praised himself so much as during these last few years.

* * * * *

At the beginning of this chapter I referred to D'Annunzio's judgments of artists in general. I did not limit myself to one single category by saying "poets and writers," since D'Annunzio's art is permeated to such a degree by music, plasticity and colour that, sometimes, reading one of his pages, it is difficult to say that one is faced with a purely literary work rather than with a picture, a statue or a musical composition. According to my point of view, any musician, painter, sculptor or poet should consider himself a colleague of D'Annunzio's.

It is not easy to obtain from D'Annunzio a judgment that corresponds to his innermost convictions. Whenever a direct question is put to him, he fences, avoids answering, smiles, changes the conversation. I have always had to be tiresomely insistent, and to fall back on strategy and carefully arranged incidents to attain my purpose.

There are numerous reasons for this difficulty in getting him to express his opinion on other people. The first of these lies in the fact that he is totally devoid of envy. Envyng none of his colleagues, he hates none, and it is therefore impossible to provoke him to utter criticism based on fear of competition or on the bitterness caused by the success of others.

The second is that he is quite impervious to the attacks of his *confrères*. Even if, at times, he has been angered into forsaking temporarily his olympic serenity, he has never gone on the war-path against isolated individuals, but only against a whole class.

"In the name of what principle do the poor devils who satisfy their hunger with the remains of my convivial table, and the thieves who purloin the fruit fallen from the trees of my garden demand my testimonial?" he wrote superbly one day.

We shall see further on how he has been treated by the critics and how he has treated them.

* * * * *

As generous in spiritual matters as in material ones, he bestows with the greatest indifference not only verbal but written certificates of genius on the most unproved artists who are brave enough to ask for them, as he calmly signs testimonials of rectitude and honesty in favour of individuals of dubious morality, only because he thinks that they have some claim on his gratitude. Sometimes (nay, frequently) he does this merely to be rid of them; so that one can place no more reliance on his declarations in favour of some third party than on the epitaphs in cemeteries which set out the numerous virtues of which the deceased gave proof in his lifetime.

This goes a long way towards explaining how, thanks to this little known trait in his character, worthless artists and ne'er-dowells have often received help, thanks to his introduction.

A typical example which I may quote is the case of one of his publishers (the clever Emilio Treves) who did not hesitate to launch a volume written by some unknown rhymester, on the assurance that a preface written by D'Annunzio was sufficient to secure its success. Finally, D'Annunzio himself repudiated the preface, frightened by the sudden outcry that arose in the

literary world against the boundless condescension which had conferred the patent of genius on this obscure writer.

On rare occasions—and they are very rare—his benevolent judgment has been justified by the success of his protégé. This actually happened in 1905 with regard to Luigi Antonelli, of whom, when he was still unknown, he wrote to me: “*My friend Luigi Antonelli comes to you with my warmest approval. He is a keen prose writer of whom I have already spoken to you. Give him a kindly reception in your firm so full of promise.*” My firm “so full of promise,” which had, by the way, to shut down a year later through lack of funds, was the “Lombard Publishing House” directed by me at Milan.

Many of the flattering comments of D’Annunzio owe their origin (especially when written in the presence of those interested) to the amiability of the Poet and to his constant desire to give pleasure to others, a feeling directly contrary to that of many great men (Carducci was a case in point) who acted as though their object in life were to show discourtesy in words and deeds to the majority of the people who approached them.

At other times his indulgence in judging the *artist* came from the personal sympathy which he felt for the *man*.

When I took the plunge and sent him the French novel which I had written under the title *La Saison des Dupes*, he wrote:

“I have read your perfidious and delicious novel. It is really a masterpiece of cynical elegance and cruel penetration.”

Sometimes D’Annunzio exaggerates his favourable judgment out of mere delight in benevolent raillery and that inextinguishable thirst for psychological study which has ever been with him. In Paris in 1914, during the first months of the war, he had the occasion to read various articles written by a famous Italian journalist on the French front. He recognised remarkable intellectual qualities in these articles, and one evening invited their author to a dinner at which I also was present.

During the meal D’Annunzio praised the journalist’s articles as he alone knew how to praise—that is, not generically, but giving the author the impression that no single detail had escaped him. The journalist drank in the Poet’s words and preened himself. D’Annunzio’s praise, as is well known, was

honey to all who wielded the pen, whether great artists or modest scribblers.

At one moment, inebriated by his own rhapsodies, D'Annunzio broke out with the following sentence: "*I do not believe that I am capable of writing like you.*"

I looked at the Poet, and he, noticing my stare, answered it with the ghost of a wink, as if to say, "You see, he will swallow that too." And, in fact, the journalist, although full of protests and denials, swallowed it indeed—so much so that a few days later, when I ventured to compare his prose to that of Victor Hugo, he asked quite seriously: "Am I to take that as a compliment?"

* * * * *

I ought now to approach the most delicate phase of all: the judgment passed by D'Annunzio on Italian writers of recent times—I mean of the last thirty years.

I am well aware, at the outset, that I could give intense pleasure to a good many people by naming a dozen of more or less successful Italian authors who for D'Annunzio hardly exist. He denies not only their intellectual value, but even their ability to write, though this in no way prevents him from praising them extravagantly to their faces, and allowing them to take for granted that he is intimately acquainted with all their works. But I must refrain; it would only cause pain to a number of kindly people who live by their pen, apart from making irreconcilable enemies in times which, alas! are difficult enough already.

Moreover, what does the mass of Italian writers of to-day care for the opinion of Gabriele D'Annunzio? Nowadays his pseudo-colleagues consider him as a sort of glorious pensioner of intellectual humanity, whose fame is so universally recognised and so imposing that it can offend no one. "He belongs to the past!" exclaim the dear *confrères* who console themselves for having for more than forty years been unable to extinguish him beneath the weight of their vituperations and now hope to bury him under a load of glory.

And yet they are powerless, for only a critic wanting in good faith could fail to recognise that one hundred pages taken at

random from the *Faville del Maglio* outdistance the whole Italian literary production of the last twenty years.

Besides, if the pygmies wished to compete with the giant, the giant countered this attitude by ignoring them in the most absolute sense of the word. They will never forgive him for having had his works translated into every language, including Japanese, nor for all the money he has made, nor for the women, nor the dogs, nor his military glory, nor the conquest of Fiume, and certainly these are big pills to swallow.

Another reason for D'Annunzio's indifference towards his contemporaries is that he reads little. He is, nevertheless, well acquainted with everything that is being published or discussed. How? That is a mystery.

Were he a Sovereign, it would be understandable: someone would read the papers and place excerpts before him; but this is never done. Moreover, who are the people whom he sees with a certain frequency now that he has settled at the Vittoriale?—the lawyer who looks after his affairs; a valiant naval officer, who is literary neither by profession nor by inclination; an architect, extremely intelligent, but a faddist who, to my knowledge, has not opened a paper for at least twenty years; at times a police official; and his servants. All these are decent folk who, when they have read their local paper and the *Corriere della Sera*, consider their intellectual hunger appeased until the next day.

I cannot believe that the task of "enlightening the D'Annunzian brain" is entrusted to chance visitors, since all men who go to visit D'Annunzio have other things to do than to bring to the Poet's notice so-called "literary movements" or new orientations; while the women . . . !

Borgese, who in his interesting study of *D'Annunzio the Writer* went rather astray when he allowed himself to dwell on *D'Annunzio the Man*, was, nevertheless, right when he affirmed that "D'Annunzio neither reads nor studies for the love of it, and that if unexpectedly deprived of creative frenzy, he loses at the same time the patience and attention necessary to read a book." "He is deficient," says Borgese—and here he exaggerates—"in varied knowledge, hidden resources, the qualities of the sub-conscious: in a word, he lacks the capacity for reading and

contemplation, directed to no particular end, but, for that very reason, more fruitful and productive."

I have heard D'Annunzio, however, deplore occasionally that he had no time for reading conscientiously the books of the various authors to whom his attention had been drawn.

"To read the works of others is for me an amusement" (he was speaking of Jack London, whose books he wanted to read), *"and I hardly ever have time to amuse myself."*

To conclude, and to return to his Italian contemporaries, I can say that D'Annunzio knows few of them, and has little esteem for those he does know, though he looks upon them with his usual paternal indulgence.

I have said that he reads little, but I must add that he derives from that "little" the maximum of profit. It is a case of prodigious memory and rapidity of assimilation making up for lack of knowledge.

I do not know what occult power of divination D'Annunzio uses, but I do know that he can talk for over an hour about a book which he has skimmed for only ten minutes. Thus, thanks to his histrionic talent, he is able to convince an author who has sent him a book that he has read and mastered its every detail. We must not forget, on the other hand, that this innocent comedy is facilitated for D'Annunzio by the fact that every writer, when his work is praised, loses his balance and is no longer capable of discriminating between truth and untruth, ironical praise and sincere appreciation—so great are his pride and delight. Imagine the effect when the critic is D'Annunzio!

Even his relationship with the critics, whose activities he once described as *"a pure and simple literary exercise without utility,"* mirrored all the anomalies and contradictions to which the temperament and psychology of D'Annunzio have accustomed us. For the most part indifferent and contemptuous, he allows himself on rare occasions to be carried away by wrath and to denounce the critics as "solemn clowns." Generally speaking, he ignores, or feigns to ignore, persons of this class as completely as he ignores his colleagues.

I have mentioned a letter from D'Annunzio to his friend Biagi, in which he jestingly complained of the contradictory

opinions expressed by the critics about one of his works. But not always, even at the beginning of the Poet's ascent towards glory, did the critics confine themselves, in his estimation, to a balanced and honestly expressed judgment.

If as a rule D'Annunzio disdains to defend himself against the attacks of the critics, and allows others to break lances in his favour, at times, as I have said, he rises up in anger and lashes them unmercifully in his rage. Faced, for instance, with the furious assault of the critics against *Più che l'amore*, he answered those who were setting themselves up as his judges with the philippic which remains famous for phrases of "*pitiful ex-crescented Catos*."

Another time, too, he showed scant patience with a campaign (immediately gaining strong support) directed to the setting up of a rival who became famous overnight. The fictitious rise of the intellectual shares of the author had the sequel which always follows exaggerated rises on the Stock Exchange.

After about a year they fell back to a nominal value, and the intellectual Italian market became normal again, with D'Annunzian shares at a premium and all the others dull and in little demand.

I am sure that he was still thinking of this far-off episode when, in 1911, at Arcachon, on my return from Italy, where I had been on his behalf, he asked me laughingly: "*Have they discovered any new genius in Italy since my departure?*"

In short, D'Annunzio takes little interest in criticism and critics, and, similarly, he has never attached much importance to official consecration of his talent, to his election to foreign or Italian academies, Nobel prizes for literature, etc.

Academies especially always provoked his smiles rather than his admiration. Having been invited to assist at a reception of the newly-elected Marcel Prevost to the French Academy, he accepted, and on his return, when I asked him for his impressions, he answered: "*Suave senile decay*."

D'Annunzio, at the end of 1892, wrote with reason:

"This year dies obscurely for Italian literature, unmarked by any significant manifestation, and little comforted by the hope which flourishes so continually these days in the black and red forests of 'the publishers' announcements. Nor are the literary reviews,

either old or new, anxious to pass their forces in review or to endeavour to wake those who sleep. The short-lived rumour abates, and the pages of reviews and newspapers are full of the usual prose and the usual rhymes of the same ten or twelve literary lions who, for too many years already, have provided credulous readers with the same intellectual fare. Let us bid good-bye to that prose, to those verses, with the polkas and the tunes of yesterday, played on the barrel-organ in the streets. Henceforth Italians know all contemporary national literature by heart, as they know the music of Pietro Mascagni; nor is there much harm in that, after all."

It is not strange, then, that his curiosity and his intellectual outlook should have been always directed across the frontiers, to where the great men lived, whose names were Zola, Huysmans, Bourget, Alphonse Daudet, de Gourmont, Péladan, Goncourt, Maupassant, Mistral, Dostoevsky, Strindberg, Ibsen, Tolstoi, Wilde, etc., and where the memory of Victor Hugo, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Michelet, Taine, Turgeneff, Walt Whitman, Swinburne and of so many others was still alive for all.

D'Annunzio has studied all these writers closely, and to many of them he devoted pages of study and criticism, now partly scattered, partly forgotten. For Flaubert especially, at one time, he cherished a boundless admiration; he quoted him frequently.

"It seemed to me at times," writes Koschnitzky, "as if Gustave Flaubert himself spoke through D'Annunzio's lips."

"*Gustave Flaubert*," D'Annunzio wrote, "*worked unceasingly his whole life long, constantly renewing his efforts, impeded by no difficulty, constant unto death.*" Nevertheless, in one of his letters there is a pronouncement which summarises an immensity of disgust; he says: "*How filthy life is! Thin soup full of hairs!*" How express with more energy the nausea which took him by the throat?

Let us hear what he said about Leo Tolstoi.

"*In Leo Tolstoi, after a fierce struggle, sensibility triumphed over intelligence. Faced by the problem of evil and death, his love of goodness and of virtue remained a faith untouched by doubt.*

"*Unable to detach himself from reality and to be uplifted in an ideal hope of future happiness, he set himself to give full scope to his love for this world; and believed that he had found an infallible prescription to make men happier, to exclude injustice and violence*

from life, and to recall the smile of happiness and peace to the face of the suffering multitudes."

* * * * *

To Emile Zola, D'Annunzio dedicates a thorough critical analysis which is too long to be quoted in its entirety.

He admires in that writer his extraordinary productivity, coupled with his frenzied love of work, of which he made a religion; and he concludes as follows: "*Emile Zola, not only in this last novel but in his work as a whole, takes account only of a small number of the 'factors' of contemporary society, pervading an impression of scientific method and restricting the scope of that life, to the boundless diversity of which he sings a closing hymn of praise. Yet, contrary to what might be expected, the edifice which he has constructed is of vast dimensions, though not many-sided like Balzac's; and it attracts attention rather by its bulk than by its material or its design.*"

Of Guy de Maupassant he wrote as follows:

"*The greatest novel of Guy de Maupassant is Une Vie, a book filled with that fine sense of balance which the author learned from a great master, Gustave Flaubert; a book where beautiful and strong pages are numerous, and whose style is of a simplicity rare in these times of Alexandrine artificiality. Here and there Flaubert's influence is much in evidence, both in the description of landscapes and in the planning of certain chapters.*"

His admiration for Ibsen is intense.

In October 1906 he wrote to the editor of a newspaper, who was chairman of a committee formed to place a commemoration stone on the house inhabited by Ibsen in Naples: "*I send you my unqualified approbation; it is a beautiful thought for the writers of the South, among whom I am proud to count myself, to honour in Naples the Northern poet who endowed the drama with a new and more deeply chiselled tragic mask.*"

It is, perhaps, idle to speak of D'Annunzio's admiration for Friedrich Nietzsche, but it may not be devoid of interest for the reader if I mention his first allusion to that great and harshly treated German philosopher.

"*'Friedrich Nietzsche. Who is he?' will ask many of my readers, to whom the fame of that German philosopher who assails with such*

violence the bourgeois contemporary doctrine and the ever-renewed Christianity, has not penetrated.

"He is one of the most original minds who have appeared at the end of this century, and one of the most audacious. The results of his intellectual speculation are contained in bizarre books written in a crude and efficient style, where paradox alternates with sarcasm and tumultuous invective with exact formulas. Of these books, the most important are entitled: Thus Spake Zarathustra—Genealogy of Morlas—Beyond Good and Evil—Twilight of False Idols—Gay Science."

Of Victor Hugo, whom he calls "*a great craftsman of the world,*" I have always heard him speak with the greatest admiration. Once only, after having given him all possible praise, he remained wrapped in thought, and added smilingly: "*Yet he slips up at times, as, for example, in the Légende des Siècles, where he uses the word 'silhouette' in speaking of a Greek god. The word belongs to 1700.*"

His relations with other foreign authors grew and multiplied as the years went by. Thus he was given a chance to gain a deeper knowledge of many of their works and even to express opinions on them, which in the majority of cases were favourable.

If, with a few honourable exceptions, Italian writers, between 1880 and 1915, could not even express admiration for D'Annunzio without betraying ill-concealed envy and obvious mental reservations, it must, in tribute to truth, be admitted that, by way of compensation, the French writers adopted a very different attitude.

It was in the house of his French publisher, Calmann Levy that D'Annunzio formed his friendship with Pierre Loti and with Anatole France. In that pure and delicate artist, Loti, he admired and loved the exquisite poetic sensibility; in Anatole France, the erudition, the purity of style, the caustic spirit, the acute conversation, biting and pleasing, rich with philosophic culture. The two Academicians warmly returned the sympathy which he showed them. When he was speaking, Anatole France would look at him from under his brows, curiously, as though he were some prodigy. He was supremely impressed by D'Annunzio's fantastic culture and his unsuspected and astounding knowledge of the French literary

tongue. "Your *patron* is extraordinary. There is nothing he does not know," he said to me one day laughingly, after reading a letter which I had brought to him from D'Annunzio, in which he had discovered some rich quotation.

"Read the telegram he sent me this morning. It concerns you." The telegram said:

"*'Abashed petitioners'—have begged me to intercede with you in the name of the three graces. Have the goodness to accord them some brief melody; I shall come and see you next week; I hope that you have brought me from Carthage a big and a little God. Yours very devotedly, Gabriele D'Annunzio.*" (The "abashed petitioners" to whom this telegram referred were Monsieur de Nouvion and myself, who were editing at that time a small French review to which I have alluded previously.)

"Few, alas! know how to write in French as well as he does," concluded the author of the *Lys Rouge*.

With Maurice Barrès his friendship was not only of a literary character but always sincere and fervid, and in the early months of the war they met frequently.

I have related in another chapter how great was the admiration of the famous French writer for our poet, and of the way in which he displayed it on the occasion of the performance of *Saint-Sébastien*.

In 1916 Barrès went to Venice to visit D'Annunzio, who was then convalescing from the war wound which injured his eye.

That exquisite Latin soul Maurice Barrès, incomparable singer of the beauty of Italy, found in D'Annunzio, who had devoted so many pages of passionate lyricism to "sweet France," even more than a friend—a real spiritual brother. And it was as such that he treated him till the time of his death. Recalling the rare friendship which always united him to Barrès, D'Annunzio said once:

"*It was just before that victory on the Marne which checked the invasion into France. Those were the days of the sorrowful retreat which followed on the defeat of Charleroi. I read that day on Barrès' drawn face all the anguish of his country. That expression, revealing so much more than personal anxiety, the expression of a man lost entirely to all but the fate of his country, has remained unforgettable to me.*"

"I am" (concluded D'Annunzio) "*the only one, or one of the few, who really know Barrès' sweetness of disposition. In my nation, as in his, the quality has almost ceased to exist, and for that very reason it is doubly precious. It is a beautiful thing that in the war and in life, two men, made to be rivals, should have understood and loved each other as Barrès and I did.*" This is certainly his true opinion of Barrès. But when I asked him once: "How would you describe Barrès?" it did not prevent him from answering, with the usual irony: "*A castrated eagle.*"

In Paris D'Annunzio became very intimate with Henri de Régnier, with his wife, a delicate writer who hid her identity under the pseudonym of Gérard d'Houville, and with Pierre Louys, his brother-in-law, who died shortly afterwards.

He also saw at intervals Portoriche, who had for him a sort of personal affection, and confessed to D'Annunzio, to his vast amusement, his woes on account of his love for a young actress forty years his junior.

He also often met Paul Hervieu, with whom he likewise maintained a cordial correspondence from Italy.

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During the same period D'Annunzio had extremely friendly relations with three other great writers.

They were Henri Bataille, whom he visited frequently, and in whose house he spent long hours enjoying those intellectual conversations which survive only in France, Maurice Maeterlinck, and Madame de Noailles.

"*The tone of Madame de Noailles's conversation*" (he said to me one day) "*is incomparable. It is even more interesting than that of Anatole France, which is the highest praise one can give it.*"

He sent me to her one day with a note. I did not see her, as she was indisposed, but whilst waiting for a reply I was shown into her boudoir. I noticed at once a pair of elegant slippers abandoned on the carpet, so small that they seemed unlikely to fit any human foot. When I returned home I imparted my discovery to D'Annunzio.

"*Is it possible that you did not know*" (he said) "*that Madame de Noailles has the smallest and the most poetic feet in all the Kingdom of France and Navarre?*"

* * * * *

The innate sense of humour of D'Annunzio, so little known to those who have made a study of his mentality, has naturally its repercussions also in his leanings and his judgments. He adores the humorous writers, and above all the writers of dialect, whose works contain so many possibilities of humour. Belle, the romantic poet, is one of his favourites. He not only re-reads his poems often, but likes to declaim the more recent ones to his friends.

He also nurses a great admiration for the Milanese poet Carlo Porta, whose work has no secrets for him. His admiration is not only determined by the irresistibly comic strain exuded by all the poetry of the famous Lombard poet, but by the profoundly human and philosophic contents which characterise almost every verse. He liked—and still reads with pleasure—the works of his childhood's friend, Cesare Pascarella, to-day a member of the Italian Academy, and also those of his comrade Trilussa. The latter also had an opportunity of collaborating with D'Annunzio in a collection of those "thoughts" which romantic (and generally plain) girls inscribe in their dreadful autograph albums.

D'Annunzio, complaisant as ever, had written:

"The greatest happiness is always on the opposite shore."

And Trilussa, to whom the album was presented immediately afterwards, added underneath:

"And happy the man who gets there."

CHAPTER VI

D'ANNUNZIO AND MONEY

The Poet and "Lady Poverty"—Galeazzo Sforza—The refuge of an impoverished Poet—A strange manuscript—The "Bons Bourgeois"—Robbery—Benign and cruel usurers—"Am I not also an historical object?"—Eternal bargaining—A wretched fifty millions!—Slavish toil.

FROM his physical and literary adolescence D'Annunzio has continually cried poverty from the housetops. His friends and admirers have listened amusedly to imaginary tales of Franciscan poverty, privations and destitution. Old ladies and idiots have been reduced to tears; lovely women and rogues have smiled complacently; honest citizens have believed about half of what they have heard.

The truth is that D'Annunzio, safe for very brief periods, on which I shall touch presently, has always enjoyed a sort of immunity from the horrors of poverty, and he has never denied himself anything. He has inevitably contrived to gratify his desires, good and bad alike.

When he raves about misery, he means, at the worst, that he lacks ready money. But it is unintentionally that he creates a false impression. The Poet has suffered chronically from empty pockets since his early youth.

But having always been able to get loans and to obtain substantial sums against the verbal promise of a sonnet, his embarrassments have been very temporary. It is one thing to live in poverty, but quite another to live in luxury, with the constant reminder that the desk is covered with unpaid bills. The latter has usually been D'Annunzio's condition.

But, in all his checkered career, has the Poet ever gone without heat? Has he ever slept between blankets because there were no sheets? Has he ever lunched or dined unless with silver plate? Has he ever worn patched clothing? Has he ever travelled third class? Has he ever stayed at a third-rate hotel? Never!

Therefore it would be to lack respect for the memory of Cervantes, Camoëns or Balzac to compare his life with theirs.

We see a *grand seigneur*, dressed in elegant pyjamas, seated in front of a roaring fire, in a beautiful room panelled with damask, full of statues, *bibelots* and richly bound books, into whose presence a creditor is being ushered by a black-coated butler. Shall we call the *seigneur* a poor man because, maybe, the luxury surrounding him as well as the services of the domestic are still unpaid for? Nay, let us rather keep the epithet and our pity for the creditor. The *grand seigneur* is the personification of D'Annunzio, eternal and impenitent dandy, camouflaged as a Franciscan for the benefit of old ladies and credulous admirers.

Where, for instance, did D'Annunzio go when, burdened with a load of debts, he left the gorgeous "Capponcina" and its fifteen servants?

To the "Versiliana," a splendid villa on the Tyrrhenian Sea.

And when he left the "Versiliana"?

To Paris to the Hôtel Meurice, where the King of Spain and the Czar of Bulgaria were accustomed to stay.

And after the Hôtel Meurice?

To a villa on the Atlantic, set in a magnificent pine forest.

And after the villa?

To Paris once more, to a historic *hôtel particulier* in the rue Geoffroy L'Asnier.

In May 1915 he left Paris in a *wagon-lit*, and where did he lodge in Genoa?

At the Hôtel du Parc.

And in Rome?

At the Hôtel Regina.

And in Fiume?

At the Government Palace.

It is true that his creditors tried to follow him, sometimes by letter, on rare occasions in person; but a host of beggars followed Galeazzo Sforza when, in 1471, he visited Florence, accompanied by 2000 noblemen and retainers, 1000 greyhounds and an innumerable quantity of falcons. What did he care?

In all probability he was as oblivious of them as D'Annunzio was oblivious of the visit of the importunate creditors, who were gently pushed out of the door by servants, or of the steady series

of dunning letters, some courteous, some much the reverse, of which in twenty years of secretaryship I must, at the most modest estimate, have consigned to the wastepaper-basket several thousands.

So let us not talk of poverty in the same breath with D'Annunzio, if only out of reverence for the author of *Little Flowers*.

D'Annunzio's poverty is perhaps a lady, but an old lady out of an Aubrey Beardsley drawing-room, decked and glittering with sham jewellery, but surely never the barefooted, sweet and adorable companion of Francesco Bernardone.

* * * * *

Nevertheless, as I have mentioned before there was one short period when the Poet was compelled to familiarise himself, I would not care to say with actual poverty, but with that sad and humiliating state of affairs called mediocrity.

He had to put up with a small middle-class establishment, an old and sharp-tongued landlady, a maid-of-all-work, petrol lamps, a cheap terra-cotta fireplace, and the inevitable and hideously persistent noise of a piano strummed on by a fellow-lodger next door. He bore this transitory tribulation with incredible resignation, the more praiseworthy because, to his aristocratic temperament, this *bourgeois* mediocrity was a more intolerable torture than absolute indigence. It was at the end of 1910, and I am quite certain that we two were the only Italians residing in the French Landes. D'Annunzio, in order to escape a hospitality which held no attraction for him, had commanded me to find for him, in the vicinity of Arcachon, a small villa, or *any* kind of residence as long as it was isolated. After many vain pilgrimages I finally discovered a damp little house, lost in the Moulleau forest, composed of nine or ten rooms, of which half were inhabited by two ancient dames and their lame niece, scions of the Guadeloupe nobility who, after decades spent in the colony, had returned to die in France. They looked as though they had escaped from a novel by Balzac. Even their name had a romantic flavour, Mesdames de Rio Nègre.

The villa, too, had a name that was a cross between the prophetic and the unusual: Villa Charitas. For the three months that we were there the Poet received no visit at all: his human intercourse was limited to a grumbling old half-wit of a servant and to the author of this biography. Withdrawn behind an impenetrable and unbroken wall of silence, quite unlike the atmosphere of the Vittoriale, where his seclusion may be described as *ad usum Delphini*, he composed four-fifths of the poem entitled *Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*. Our small capital was spent, I would not say on ornament, but on an attempt to make the incredibly *bourgeois* appearance of these three rooms a little less offensive to the eyes of the Poet.

The bedroom, study and a small dining-room, of which our home consisted, covered an area of some 65 square yards. A neutral-tinted material for the walls, some cotton velvet to cover table-tops and armchairs, a few cushions . . . this was the sum of our purchases.

"*I live with little,*" D'Annunzio wrote at that time to his publisher. "*I have often celebrated my nuptials with 'Lady Poverty.'*" And, for once, in all this he was sincere; but how changed from that D'Annunzio who, a year earlier, had rested his tired limbs among the three hundred damask cushions of the "Capponcina."

All the same, this modest outlay sufficed to wreck our already depleted family budget. From our dear motherland, in place of the doubloons for which we were sighing, there arrived nothing but bills clamouring to be paid, ill-tempered letters, and injunctions forwarded with the tragic insistence common to two human organisations—the law and the army.

Naturally, with the fond devotion of a good secretary, I destroyed each morning innumerable communications which would have irritated D'Annunzio beyond measure. But like poisonous weeds they seemed to spring up again twenty-four hours later. It was clear that my method brought only moral relief. There came a day, after a week's residence at Villa Charitas, when he, who was one day to be sovereign of a city, candidly confessed to me that, having spent some hundred francs on flowers, he had only a hundred francs left to cover the running expenses of the household till the end of the month.

With this anything but reassuring statement, the Poet retired to his study, with a heart even lighter than his purse.

At tea-time—the only moment of the day when he showed himself—we held a short “Crown Council,” and I submitted my plan to him. I proposed to go up that same night to Paris to have a talk with Gabriel Astruc, the impresario who had undertaken to produce *Saint-Sébastien*, and who was impatiently awaiting the manuscript. I proposed to put into his hands something that looked like a tragedy without actually being one, to obtain an advance payment of a thousand francs, and then to return to Arcachon with all speed.

This bold financial project met with D'Annunzio's approval, not on account of its greatness or genius but because he realised at once that it was the only practicable one. From various boxes we exhumed all the material which the Poet had amassed towards the making of the future tragedy.

Alas, there were only three or four thousand verses in all! Would Gabriel Astruc, last and worthy representative of a line of Portuguese Hebrews, realise that the value of a poetical work could not, like a bale of goods, be appraised at so much a yard? Would that most astute of impresarios loosen the strings of his purse in exchange for so tenuous a manuscript?

However, by an unexpected stroke of luck, these poetic scraps included portions of different acts of the tragedy. I remember perfectly, in this connection, the delicate and pathetic choruses of the “Virgins” and of the “Youths” from the first act, the violent and magnificent invective addressed by the “Emperor” to the “Saint” in the third, a fragment of the mysterious recitative of the “Young Girl with the Fever,” and another important passage, the whole making a sort of sample book of the tragedy.

We agreed that the diversity of subjects treated in the text could hardly fail to create in the soul of the producer a conviction that the whole opera was virtually, if not actually, finished, and thus aid me in the financial side of the transaction. But in any case it was no time for discussion. We had to act.

I obtained from the Poet some sheets of his thickest parchment, and adopting the most sprawling handwriting of which I was capable, I concentrated on the task of copying the manuscript.

At eight in the evening the finished copy of all that had been composed by the Poet up to the last moment lay on the table, accurately divided into its intrinsic parts and, according to his custom, prettily tied with ribbon. The manuscript was accompanied by a letter from the Poet to Astruc, which commented on the work accomplished, as well as on that still to come. It contained, moreover, that nicely calculated type of threat by which prodigal sons and hard-up authors invariably try to coerce their respective fathers and editors, the one saying to his father, "I shall kill myself," and the other to his editor, "I have suspended work."

With a graceful gesture, as though presenting me with a rose, the Poet handed over fifty francs, which represented the cost of a third-class ticket from Arcachon to Paris, including a cushion for my head during the night. The other fifty francs, he remarked unsmilingly, would be retained by him to meet unforeseen expenditure. Could anything be more just?

The next step was to pack my suit-case and depart.

At the last moment a spectre rose before my eyes. It was not exactly that of hunger, but a close relative. It was the problem of providing for my material existence during the two or three days that were necessary to carry out my mission of bearding the astute producer.

What was I to do?

The problem was grave and urgent. True, one solution presented itself, and it had a certain intrigue. I could take up my abode in one of the palatial hotels, the only ones whose tradition it is to give credit, have my fill of food and drink, and make the porter pay for my taxis until I had achieved my object. But if I followed this system, I should be obliged, later on, to use for the settlement of my hotel bill nearly the whole of the sum I was hoping to extort from Astruc in favour of the prisoner of the Villa Charitas.

The Poet agreed that the logic of this reasoning was convincing; it was therefore necessary to find some new solution, and to find it quickly: the train was leaving at ten!

I remained deep in meditation, with my head between my hands, but on lifting my eyes I noticed that D'Annunzio had disappeared. I heard his light step ascending the creaking stairs

which led to his bedroom. After a few minutes I heard it again descending.

Without a word, but with an enigmatic smile, he placed on the table his gold watch and chain, a gold pencil and several small gold mascots. I said nothing, but made an addition to the sacrificial heap by slipping from my finger the ring which I always wore. Then I wrapped up the lot in a piece of paper and slipped the parcel into my pocket.

"Let me ask one question on a matter of history," I said. "Since when have official pawnshops existed in France?"

And D'Annunzio, who was always primed to the teeth with regard to historical questions, answered at once: "*Since the eighth of Thermidor of the year III.*"

An hour later the ten o'clock train was carrying me towards Paris. And five days later, not without having had some tragicomical, and even tragic, adventures, with which I will not waste the reader's time, I found myself in a position to stage a triumphant return to Arcachon, carrying with me the few thousand francs that were to allow D'Annunzio to make both ends meet and to finish in comparative peace the *Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*.

The only souvenir of this anxious period was a small sheet of paper which I found on the Poet's writing-table a few days after my return, and which I have religiously kept.

On it, in my absence, D'Annunzio had amused himself by jotting down a collection of slang expressions referring to his temporary but regrettable plight. Here they are, for the edification and instruction of the reader.

"*I am in the soup—My pocket-book is clean-shaven—I haven't a sou—I am pumped dry—I am so much desert waste—Poverty is my name—Misery lives with me.*"

* * * * *

But no matter how we look at it, money has ever been D'Annunzio's *bête noire*, taking fiendish delight in disrupting the rhythm of his life and subjecting him to daily and hourly torments. As others need bread to eat and water to drink, the Poet has needed money to spend since the day he left Ciccognini college. When his purse is empty, he is agitated, worried; he is

stifled like a sufferer from asthma; and his discomfort is not only on his own account, but on that of those who come to him for assistance.

In another chapter I treat at length of his generosity, but here I desire to show the infinite delicacy with which he aids the complete stranger or the intimate friend. On such occasions his tact is exquisite, and he actually apologises for his own charitable acts. Never does he make these gifts in public; never does he demand the payment of any sum he may have granted in the form of a loan. He even goes so far as to refuse, with a kindliness which makes it impossible for the beneficiary to feel offended or humiliated, the restitution of these amounts. The fact is that he has seldom been troubled in this last respect, for, if my memory is loyal, a poor employee to whom the Poet once advanced two thousand lire is the only man on record who has ever tried to pay his debt.

He reveals his own character in this passage from *Cincinnato*, which he wrote when he was seventeen:

"On one occasion I offered him a few pennies which my mother had given me. He made a scornful gesture of refusal, and turned his back on me. In the evening we met again outside the Porte Nuova. I approached him and said: 'Cincinnato, forgive me.'"

* * * * *

I have frequently been asked how D'Annunzio manages to get rid of so much money and have always found it difficult to answer this apparently simple question. It is a complicated matter and quite beyond the understanding of the average worthy citizen of this world.

There are, in the opinion of the *bourgeois* of the standard type, only three roads which lead to certain ruin, and their names are: Women, Gambling and Bad Company. If I explain that D'Annunzio has never lavished money on women, that he never touches cards and never speculates on the Exchange and that, being a lover of solitude, he has never been surrounded by companions, good or bad, my honest *bourgeois* shakes his head and asks:

"Then what on earth becomes of all the money that he makes?"

I am forced to reply: "But don't you understand that D'Annunzio's conception of life is as different from yours as an Eskimo's from that of an American millionaire?"

The word "economy" does not exist in the Poet's vocabulary and the word "bank" has no significance. He has scarcely ever had a penny in a bank, because he stubbornly insists upon ignoring the functions and the merits of such institutions. When he receives an important sum of money—as, for instance, ten or twenty thousand lire—one of his most difficult problems is to decide where to hide it.

The bank-notes are always to be found somewhere within the four walls of his house. They may be in a trunk or a valise; sometimes they are between the pages of a book on a shelf in the library; they even have been placed beneath the pedestal of a statue. But under no circumstances do they remain for more than twenty-four hours in the same hiding-place.

It has sometimes happened that D'Annunzio himself has forgotten where he has put the money, and has spent anxious moments hunting for it. Further, he has never kept accounts, so that, supposing he had received some fifty thousand lire, he can never say with any certainty how much he had spent on particular items or how much he still retains. But he has always preferred to remain in this nebulous state until the last penny has gone, rather than face a reality which might cause him remorse and disillusion. In spite of this system, nothing has ever been stolen from D'Annunzio. He said to me once: "*It would be very difficult to rob me, for a thief would certainly take longer to find out where I put my money*" (he never said, "where I hide it," considering the expression beneath his dignity) "*than I take to spend it. For D'Annunzio,*" he concluded, "*the thief most to be feared is himself.*"

He never knew the meaning of the expression "current account" till one day, in a moment of frankness, he asked me to explain it to him. When I told him that it was "an amount deposited in the bank against which sums could be withdrawn as required," he answered with the utmost candour: "*Well then, if I am going to withdraw the money, wouldn't it be more sensible not to deposit it at all?*"

When I pointed out to him that the bank paid interest on

current accounts, he broke into incredulous laughter. "*How,*" he asked, "*do you expect the bank to pay interest if the money can be withdrawn at will?*"

Finally I concluded that it was better to give up the explanation.

I once opened a banking account in his name for a fairly important sum and gave him a cheque-book, which, after learning from me how to use, he carried it about with the visible pride of a child with a toy pistol.

The end was not long in coming. Before twenty days had passed he had signed all the cheques and withdrawn the entire sum. Ever since he has given current accounts a wide berth, regarding them merely as a hindrance and a rather doubtful joke.

He is such a spendthrift by temperament that to discover a new way of spending money is pure joy to him.

For instance, he was, as I saw, radiant with joy over the news that, in accordance with new regulations, express delivery telegrams could be sent by Ital-Cable at four times the ordinary rate. From that day onwards he delightedly adopted the new system every time opportunity offered, and he would, no doubt, have used it on the most everyday occasions but for the fear of being laughed at by the girls in the telegraph office at Gardone Riviera.

Set this beside the sententious assertion of one of his pseudo-biographers: "Even the D'Annunzian prodigality is a matter open to controversy. He indulges in it because he finds it a useful way to impress others and keep them at a distance, like the sovereign who has no sooner loaded a subject with benefits than he forces him to his knees. Gabriele, in fact, is as temperate in spending as he is in eating and drinking."

Anyone who has been with D'Annunzio for a week will find that paragraph laughable. But it need cause no surprise, for its dilettante author confesses in his own book that he never knew D'Annunzio personally, and saw him only once, when from a high balcony he tossed down a carnation to the crowd. The would-be exponent of the D'Annunzian personality had the good fortune to catch this flower; but he drew his psychological conclusions (again the confession is his own) from the more or less truthful and more or less prejudiced reports of other people.

D'Annunzio unfortunately knows a great deal about the way in which promissory notes and bills are discounted, having, from childhood up, had dealings with the money-lenders of all the countries of the world.

The Poet's transactions with money-lenders, during the thirty years I spent with him, were always conducted through me. Whether from some sense of shame or merely with the object of deferring eventual complications, he always imagined that his bills could be renewed indefinitely, but it was always I who acted as his intermediary. Consequently the money-lenders, particularly in France, always regarded me as the beneficiary, receiving assistance from an indulgent and illustrious friend.

In theory he has always wished to diminish his expenditure, and his programmes and proposals for a simpler life are wholly admirable. Thus, in 1905, he wrote to me: *"It is urgent that my material needs should be promptly provided for. I am passing through unspeakable torment. Nevertheless, I am full of courage, and am confident that in a few days I shall emerge from my difficulties."* This confidence, however, was so far misplaced that he wrote to me a few months later: *"Please find me another ten thousand lire (or, better, fifteen thousand) from some benign usurer, I repeat, at any price."*

And in 1912: *"I have been obliged to incur another debt simply to live. When you get the two thousand five hundred, pay the money-lender. No, keep them for a rainy day."*

And on the 2nd of January, 1913: *"I want you to do me another great favour. See if, by paying the interest, you can put off the payment for another month. And let me know at once, so that if you can't I may take steps in time. But I should be very glad if you would manage it. I embrace you. A happy new year!"*

A very nice beginning for a new year!

And in 1913: *"Do you think you could possibly raise a thousand francs until the 8th of August from some obliging usurer?"*

And in 1914: *"There is this nightmare of bills for the end of the month. One for a thousand and one for seven hundred and fifty. I can't quite remember. I must also pay the rent. Do you think you would find it difficult in Paris to raise two thousand francs for ten days?"*

And again in 1914: "*I am awaiting for a solution for my troubles. Have you, by any chance, a handy money-lender?*"

The money-lender, in his opinion, was only kind and benign when he was ready to lend him money, not when he wanted it back. In such circumstances the Poet showed himself less good-natured in his judgment. Thus he wrote to me:

"*Once again I do not know how to meet my obligations. When the two hundred and fifty lire are paid, the usurer will have made a thousand.*"

I could go on in this fashion quoting innumerable examples. But let us return to our good *bourgeois* and to his incomprehension of my hero's mentality.

When the *bourgeois* is in an extravagant mood, he goes into a shop and, after considerable argument and persuasion on the part of the shopkeeper, acquires two, three or, possibly, half a dozen ties. If D'Annunzio happens into the same shop, he is certain to come out only when he has purchased two, three or even six *dozen* ties. And, even so, since it is a mania with him to present them wholesale to his friends, by the end of the month there are only two or three left for his own use and he is forced to renew the "stock."

This prodigal method of shopping, apart from raising havoc with his purse, has a very serious disadvantage. The shopkeepers, first hypnotised and then inspired by the extravagance of this illustrious customer, besiege D'Annunzio with offers of unlimited credit and send him—ostensibly on approval—merchandise which he has not ordered and which, nine times out of ten, he does not need or want but which he neglects, through carelessness, to return.

When the bills for these orgies of voluntary or involuntary buying arrive, he is astounded and loud in his recriminations. When he is eventually sued for payment, his wrath knows no bounds, especially if, as in the instance I am about to cite, he is convinced that he has been cheated.

"*That blackguard X*" (this was in 1903), "*despite the fact that Tenneroni has made three unsuccessful attempts to extract an account from him, is now suing me for the second time. I have already paid him two thousand lire for various robberies. From the present total there must be deducted the price of shirts and*

cravats, refused and returned. The ready-made merchandise of this smooth-spoken thief is worthless and unwearable. I sent back some of his things, but, through an oversight, a huge package is still here, and it is an infernal nuisance. I do not want to go to the trouble of proving to this vile individual that he is an untrustworthy rascal. I rely on you to deal with him!"

When the good *bourgeois* contemplates a purchase, he examines the article, asks the price and then puts the traditional question to the salesman: "Have you nothing a little cheaper?" Not so D'Annunzio! He inquires: "Have you nothing more expensive?" What he really means is: "Have you nothing of a better quality?"

One of D'Annunzio's eccentricities is that he very seldom carries a pocket-book, but when he has any money he stuffs all his pockets with bills and coins. In August, 1910, when the financial situation was critical, I suggested that he go through his winter clothes, which were put away in camphor. He complied and was enchanted with himself when he had collected, from various pockets, more than five hundred francs. He said proudly: "*Just look at that! Were it not for my excellent habit, which you so unjustly criticise, where would we look for such a fortune?*"

Still another of his eccentricities is that he will never, under any circumstances, leave a shop without having made a purchase of some sort. "*It is shameful,*" he insists, "*to go away empty-handed. It is not the fault of the merchant if he has nothing worth while to sell.*"

He has a way of according his expenses with his earnings. If he has five hundred lire, he buys flowers. If he has a thousand, he feels that he can afford ivory elephants. If he has a hundred thousand, he immediately thinks of precious silks, gold cigarette cases, dogs and horses. If he is troubled with a million, he is interested in houses.

D'Annunzio must buy!

Even when he is in serious pecuniary difficulties, he buys. A letter written in 1913 begins: "*I am weary of money troubles. I am seriously considering retiring to a Trappist monastery.*" At the bottom of the same page of the same letter: "*Go to David's and order a green morocco binding for the first half-year of the 'Journal des Dames.'*"

Could any fortune withstand such attacks?

A professor at the Collegio Ciccognini wrote of him in a monthly report: "He is very 'lame' in arithmetic." D'Annunzio was fourteen then. He is over seventy now, but he still needs crutches in this respect.

* * * * *

When D'Annunzio is penniless he conceives a hatred for the entire human race, which he holds responsible for his personal distress. He arrives at the conclusion that the whole world is conspiring to torture him with money troubles and, if a payment is delayed, he is certain that it is intentional. He wrote to me one day: "*That bank finally decided to pay me my two thousand five hundred lire! They are guilty of unpardonable negligence. Their excuse is that they thought I was in Tripoli.*" Another letter, replete with the usual lamentations about material difficulties, ends: "*Can it be that nowhere in this world there is an eccentric soul who will give me the few millions I require to work in peace when there are quantities of idiots who spend as much and more for stamp collections and historical objects? Am I not, also, a historical object of some value?*"

The fault with this idea is that, when the Poet is in a position to "work in peace," he is perturbed, distracted, inebriated by the delight of spending money. He is busy scheming to decorate and construct, and even the preliminary estimates invariably call for three times the amount at his disposal.

In 1905, when I was his publisher and in that capacity remonstrated with him paternally about an inexcusable waste of money, he answered me textually with this bit of logic: "*You seem to forget that I have eight horses and twenty-two dogs and that my ties cost a hundred lire and my shirts three hundred each! It is obvious that I cannot manage on the absurd amount you mention!*" He was as serious as the clerk who complains: "But I am married and the father of ten children."

Sometimes his condition of eternal bankruptcy amuses him. In 1913 he found an article in the *Intransigent* which said that a Monsieur Michel Pons, poet-restaurateur, was offering credit to artists. Having sent me the clipping, he followed it

up with this telegram: "*If news fails to arrive we must accept offer of Poet Pons.—Gabriele.*"

On very rare occasions he is stricken with remorse, and makes solemn vows to reform his ways.

For instance, he wrote me in 1916: "*The sum you sent me evaporated in an instant. Moreover, my work tires me by its length and endangers the sight of my other eye. I must therefore take care of my health and check waste with a view to the future.*"

At other times he is inspired by a secret ardour to stabilise his position: "*Try to get a clear and comprehensive idea of my entire financial situation,*" he wrote to me in 1910, "*and of the possible remedies, so that you may place them before me without slips or errors.*"

But it is obvious that his wise programmes of settlement are destined to remain no more than a pious wish. In a letter acknowledging a brief scheme of economic reconstruction which I sent him, he wrote: "*I have paid the bills, but your forecast of the peace I may expect to enjoy for the next two months is fallacious.*"

In 1921 he wrote to me once more in the same state of mind as eleven years earlier: "*I see myself forced to take up a new loan of ten thousand lire in order to pay for the furniture of Cargnacco. I am in urgent need of money. I assure you that this exigent attitude which I am continually obliged to assume is extremely distasteful to me.*"

"*When I know how much I owe, what I do not owe, what I possess, and what I do not possess, I shall be able to bring some order into my accounts, but I shall certainly have to send hucksters out into the streets to sell, sheet by sheet, my lifeless and hateful manuscripts.*"

"*I embrace you, and I remain, Your Gabriele, the poor little child of Christ.*"

After a few weeks he reverted to the question of the manuscripts and proposed to me a solution that was more reasonable than that of the hucksters: "*If I succeed in creating a film, I shall make a million, but in the meantime I must find money. And I have so many manuscripts in store! Is there no conceited nincompoop who will buy a few? I offer you 20 per cent of any profits.—Gabriele.*"

At other times he made fun of his eternal and monotonous

position of "perpetual debtor," and thus wrote to me in 1918, in answer to my question as to what he intended to do: "*Perhaps I shall apply for a commission in the regular army with a view to a career. Or I shall content myself with the income accruing from my war decorations, which is tantamount to my stipend as a national writer. Or I may end as a Bolshevik, not without making a considerable splash. Or I may die on Sunday from Spanish flu. I embrace you.*"

"Your Gabriele D'Annunzio, Invalid."

D'Annunzio's letters, his talk, his whole life have been poisoned by preoccupations connected with money. It is the *leit-motif* that begins and ends every one of his symphonies. Only the Fiume period is in some sort an exception, and that only because in his situation as chief he could have all he needed without payment or, to be more correct, without personally paying.

All the *Comandante* had to do was to give orders. He never took undue advantage of these facilities, that we must recognise; but he had all he could possibly want.

Supposing he wished to ask a hundred guests to dinner, he gave the orders and the dinner took place. Did he need a saddle-horse, he had only to express the wish and at dawn the following morning his *arditi* would be under the window with twenty mounts, "ravished" during the night from the Italian troops camping at the gates of the city.

Did he want to make an excursion to the island of Veglia or Arbe, he had only to telephone to the Maritime Command and immediately a torpedo boat was sent to fetch him.

Sovereigns, we know, do not handle money; they only sign decrees, orders, requisitions. And so did D'Annunzio.

The nightmare of money, of that vile medium which he always detested, yet of which he was always in need, was a thing of the past, and it may be said that for him the golden age had returned, only disturbed now and then, when called to meet expenditure on his own account, or to honour pledges unconnected with his position of *Comandante* of the town.

It should be made quite clear that, to his everlasting honour, this man, who has been so widely calumniated, has never for a moment considered the possibility of taking advantage of his

position to lighten, even temporarily, the burden of his personal debts. The running expenses of his house at Arcachon, his debts in France and the cost of moving all his furniture to Italy, were gradually defrayed, with a thousand shifts, out of the income derived from his works and by advances received from the Society of Authors and from his publishers.

There was a moment when the *Comandante* of Fiume captured the steamer *Cogni* which carried merchandise valued at more than fifteen million lire. On the strength of it he might have obtained from the local banks any advance he wanted; yet this is the letter which, at just that moment, Gabriele D'Annunzio wrote to me in France:

"The solicitor tells me that he has sent you what is necessary for the renewal of that eternal bill.

"In view of the terrible conditions regulating the exchange, it is ruinous to send money to France. I do not know how to settle the rent. You will have to contrive to get me a commission—some literary or film work in Paris."

This is a magnificent and truly "Garibaldian" proof of the rectitude of which he never bragged and which has been systematically ignored and hushed up by his ill-wishers, whose duty it was to bring this fact to the notice of the general public, especially after having circulated so many odious calumnies concerning D'Annunzio's unscrupulousness.

How often could he have saved himself the daily annoyances so intolerable to the creative artist, who needs complete peace and tranquillity of mind to accomplish his work, if he had consented to "do business"! And how many times such opportunities were pressed on him, especially during the Fiume period!

But the "filibuster," as he likes at times jestingly to call himself, though dogged in defence of his literary patrimony, has, from a sort of fundamental incorruptibility and an invincible horror of all that is not above-board or that savours of personal interest, always detested so-called business.

When "deals" of that ilk are suggested to him, he listens, smiles and invariably refuses to take any part in them.

This is the real D'Annunzio, my dear readers, and I, who remained at his side throughout so many years, can assure you

that I have never found him at fault over this delicate question; this is the man who, as I have shown, while reigning over a city without any possible control from anywhere, wrote to me, overshadowed by the grave preoccupation of having to pay a rent which, all in all, amounted to 2500 lire!

* * * * *

Naturally his conception of figures has undergone a prodigious change during the course of years. In 1913 he wrote to me from Arcachon to Paris: *"In order to help you in your difficulties, I send you the enclosed two hundred lire, which are all I have: I will send you another fifty as soon as they reach me."* In January, 1920, he wrote to me from Fiume: *"If I had fifty millions in my safe I would revolutionise the whole world and prove myself the true liberator."* And he concluded: *"Why must such a superb will be cramped for want of so wretched a sum?"*

It must be understood that this "wretched sum" was not wanted for his personal needs, but the fact of D'Annunzio's even considering it a miserable one is an indication of his changed ideas with regard to money-values.

As soon, however, as D'Annunzio had once more become a simple citizen in his new retreat of Cargnacco, his old frenzy for money attacked him again, and in 1921 it rose to a paroxysm.

True, his exigencies were no longer those of a sovereign who wanted to set fire to the whole of Europe, but, nevertheless, they were the necessities of a splendid spendthrift. His requirements, as usual, were unceasing, and, moreover, magnified, by the first expenses connected with the construction and the embellishment of the Vittoriale.

Here are some epistolary gems, more eloquent than any comment.

He wrote to me in February:

"I must have 50,000 lire on the 31st March. Get them for me, and be sure that I receive them punctually."

And two months later:

"At this moment I have not even a thousand lire in all for my daily needs. My solicitor must collect the sums owing to me. It is necessary to await his return."

And in May: *"To-morrow I shall be able to send you the fourth*

article. *I am working like a horse spurred on by misfortune."*

And during September, the following eloquent appeal:

"Try to persuade friend B. that at least some small advance is essential.

"The money recently received has evaporated. I was obliged to give some 10,000 lire to B. for various expenses! Do let me have another 20,000, and send them to me at Gardone without fail. Pity me.

"The way money flies is frightful. I ask you to obtain 30,000 lire in Milan. Thanks."

And in November, these solicitations in quick succession:

"I am forced to borrow another 10,000 lire to meet the bills for the furniture of Cargnacco.

"Ask P. to come to my help. I am urgently in need of funds.

"In a few days I must also pay for the furniture of Cargnacco—another 13,000 lire. Ask for them to be sent."

And finally in December:

"A short while ago I wrote to my solicitor telling him that I have had to round off my property with another twelve and a half acres of adjoining land and that I must pay for them. I have asked him whether my half-yearly balance amounts to 256,000 lire and whether he can help me. I shall be grateful to you if you will try and obtain this sum for me."

Remember that this was 1921! I am justified in reminding the reader that the sums now frequently needed for the work at the Vittoriale are no longer limited to six figures but have risen to seven.

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As has been shown, confronted by the money problem, two persons exist in D'Annunzio: the great artist, who wants to create and *has* to create and, for that reason, aspires to financial security, and, as he himself affirmed, *"a luxurious animal, to whom superfluities are as necessary as breathing."*

No doubt this second being is full of exigencies and the major part of his fundamental requirements has as an aim the acquisition of things which please him, and includes the endless expenses of a wasteful life.

But perhaps the feeling which sincerely and imperiously

dominates his being is the authentic anguish of the artist who desires to have his soul and his mind entirely free for the creation of his works.

I still have in my possession a letter which he wrote from Arcachon to Paris, in which this desperate fight of his spirit is thrown into relief with a cruel and touching intensity:

"I am in a singular state of distress. I ought to sit down at once and write down the dramas which possess me. And I am forced to think of the remunerative articles which will defray the expenses of my daily life.

"But as my brain is full of great fantasies, I do not succeed in occupying it in a different direction. I have begun an article ten times without being able to continue it. I am discontented, agitated, and full of humiliation and remorse.

"The days speed by, emptily. The conscience of an artist such as I is much more imperious than vile necessity. I believe that I shall succeed in nothing, and that the worries will go on increasing and overwhelming me.

"I hoped to have peace for two or three months. But it has proved impossible. What shall I do? I do not know. And this monotonous struggle will prolong itself indefinitely!

"This most pernicious condition places me in a state of impotence. I embrace you. The weather is lugubrious. I am finished."

I still have in my possession another sent to me at a different moment, in which I find these words, which express and confirm in melancholy fashion the same thought:

"I have spoken with B. of my affairs and of my eternal torment, and I believe that he has felt a fraternal pity for my slavish toil."

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Poor D'Annunzio! How sincere and pathetic are these desperate invocations for an unattainable peace!

CHAPTER VII

D'ANNUNZIO AND THE CINEMA

An historic banquet—D'Annunzio compares himself to Orpheus—The charm of D'Annunzio's collaboration—A producer who camps on the premises—"Red meat and century-old cognac"—Film dividends—Two American business men—Eight hundred thousand lire found and lost again—"The man who stole the *Gioconda*"—"The Crusade of the Innocents"—Mary Pickford's mouth—"I am in the darkness between the robot and kindness"—The tenth Muse.

D'ANNUNZIO's first contact with the world of the cinema took place in Paris in 1911 at the Hôtel Continental. Two important personalities of the Italian cinema of that time, whose names I omit, because they would not forgive me for revealing the story which concerns them, had come from Italy on purpose to consult the Poet, and had invited us, D'Annunzio and myself, to a private luncheon party at that hotel. It is a well-known Parisian custom to discuss at table all kinds of important affairs, including the floating of banks or even the solution of ministerial crises.

Over the *sole meunière*, accompanied by the inevitable Sauterne (if the business is a small one, the modest Graves will prove sufficient), the business is outlined and sketched; with the *côtelettes de mouton à la Villeroy* considerable progress is made, and part of the capital subscribed. Over the *pêche Melba* the President of the Bank is nominated; and by the time the *fine 1868* is served, the new bank has come into being. The Italian producers had followed this French tradition, a tradition justified by results, for during a good dinner the atmosphere created is one that by far exceeds in geniality and goodwill the more prosaic one of an office. This time, however, the two business men had miscalculated, for D'Annunzio at that time drank only cold water, and in consequence his mind remained clear and fresh. It was thus that he succeeded in wresting from his hosts a contract (*risum teneatis amici!*) of 2000 lire for each scenario drawn from his works.

2000 lire! In 1911 this was an important sum, and the mere thought of handling it brought a complacent smile to

D'Annunzio's lips. It was, by the way, the same D'Annunzio who, eighteen years later—that is, in May, 1929—was writing to me concerning the adaptation of *La Pisanella* for the films. "*I have already explained to you the reasons which prevent me from accepting the huckstering restrictions which have been placed upon my very modest demands. You will realise that 500,000 lire on account of my royalties represent the minimum for a subject of such importance, further increased by the coming publication of the work in book form. You are a witness to the rapidity with which manuscripts have been accumulating of late.*"

Let us leave these regions of high finance to return to the modest times when he received 2000 lire per scenario.

The contract of 1911, if not actually signed, was drafted in the rough on the same day, and of all the contracting parties, D'Annunzio was certainly the most jubilant. He often recalls this happy period of his life, and, above all, a small episode connected with the historic luncheon. The two film experts, although masters of their craft, through a feeling of inferiority caused by comparing their own intellectual standards with those of the Poet, were not quite at ease with their guest. But, little by little, partly owing to the Poet's extraordinary cordiality and partly owing to the white and red Burgundy, they shed their initial diffidence and plucked up fresh courage.

By the time the dessert was placed on the table they were unblushingly discussing art, literature, politics and psychology, all of which filled D'Annunzio with exquisite enjoyment. In the end their enthusiasm burst all bounds.

"Do you know, *Maestro*," said one of them, "it is simply incredible how, in spite of everything one has heard, one feels immediately at ease with you and talks as though you were just anybody." "*Perhaps you don't know*," D'Annunzio answered with his most enchanting smile, "*that I possess the same qualities as my colleague Orpheus . . .*"

"I see, I see," said the other, laughing, "another Orpheus!"

And turning to me, he added: "What a marvellous man! What culture! There isn't a thing he does not know. Do tell me who this Orpheus was."

I naturally preferred not to enlighten him.

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Once the contract was signed, D'Annunzio took no further interest in it.

Cinematographic art was then in its infancy. The Poet cared as little about the adaptation of his work as a celebrated composer cares about the tunes of his opera played by barrel-organs in a village street. He did not even display any curiosity with regard to the interpretation and execution of his scenarios. Only once, ten years later, was he compelled to be present, in his capacity of *Comandante*, at the showing of a film adapted from his work, *Leda senza Cigno*. The author literally shook with laughter from beginning to end, so childish and distorted did it seem to him. *It was the first and only time* that D'Annunzio was present at the projection of a film taken from one of his works.

"*Cabiria?*" you ask.

"*Cabiria,*" I answer, "has never been seen by D'Annunzio."

This statement, moreover, made in such positive fashion, will astonish many people. It will astonish them less when they learn the true and authentic story of *Cabiria*, which is only known in its full particulars to four people in all: three of these—that is, D'Annunzio and the two owners of the film, who have naturally not cared to reveal it—and the fourth, myself, who have hitherto been bound to secrecy by professional etiquette. This is what happened: The time was June, 1913, and D'Annunzio was penniless, a state that could normally be postulated for him, just as one may say of another that he is a Catholic, has white hair, or suffers from a nervous twitch.

He lived then at No. 47, Avenue Kléber, in a pretty flat which he had decorated to his own taste and in which the outbreak of the war still found him.

During one of our numerous budgetary confabulations, in which I took part in an advisory capacity, as to the means of raising money, the Poet showed me a letter which he had received a few days earlier. It was rather curious, as much with regard to its form as to its contents, and, as the original has remained in my hands, I wish to share it with the reader. Here it is:

"MAESTRO,—

"We are so used to our letters being hurled into the paper-basket at first sight that we hasten to confess ourselves cinema producers, and we ask your pardon for hiding our names under the cloak of anonymity when approaching you. It is not double-dealing that inspires our subterfuge but the knowledge of the wrongs we have suffered at the hands of people in whose eyes neither a great work nor a great name carries weight. [The authors of the letter alluded to some venomous criticisms of previous films taken from D'Annunzio's work.]

"To put it briefly, we have in mind a money-making project which would cause you only the *slightest* inconvenience, and could in no way damage your reputation. Would you allow us, at your convenience, to come and submit it to you?

"With profound regard" (etc.).

Whoever had composed this letter had unconsciously (I say "unconsciously" because he had no personal acquaintance with the Poet, and even less with his temperament) struck two notes which were likely to gain attention: the first, that of recognising *a priori* that to be connected with the cinema represented, at the time, a less serious introduction than the visiting card of a tradesman; the second that of tickling D'Annunzio's ever-vibrant curiosity by hinting at a possible and easy way of making money with the *slightest* amount of inconvenience.

The letter produced a magic effect.

D'Annunzio turned it over to me and asked me to summon the author to my Paris office in order to find out what truth there was in this mysterious proposal.

My office was at 62 Rue de La Boétie. I was at that time editor of a fashion paper which had brought me little money, a good deal of trouble, and, as a compensation which I considered by no means despicable, the acquaintance of numerous "mannequins" whom D'Annunzio, for once (a rare case in the course of our friendship), was forced to sample at second-hand.

Signor Pastrone (this was the name of the author of the letter) presented himself punctually, and without indulging in side issues, placed before me a typical American proposition. I call it thus because it was precise, bold and intelligible.

"I have just completed," he said to me, "a new and magnificent film which will run for three hours. I have with me the photographs of nearly 200 episodes, which will give a complete idea of the *mise en scène*. The captions are ready and so is the title.

"But—and I say this without any false modesty—although the technique of my film cannot be improved, I cannot say the same of the title or of the captions. Moreover, it stands in need of a sponsor, and a great name of world-wide and unquestionable fame has occurred to me. I have dreamed, and so has my partner, of Gabriele D'Annunzio. I am ready to disburse 50,000 lire for the privilege of his readaptations of the captions and story—a far from amusing occupation, I admit—and even more for the paternity of the film."

I cannot remember whether Signor Pastrone mumbled these last words, being slightly hoarse, or whether I misunderstood them, through a momentary lapse of attention. The fact is, that I remained uncertain as to the exact total named.

The amount seemed enormous to me, and for those times it really was. The most which could be obtained in Europe for a scenario (America did not come into the picture) was 3000 or 4000 lire.

50,000 lire were at that time equivalent to an offer of almost five millions in our days, an offer which would, I think, be favourably received even by a sovereign.

At any rate, I did not consider it advisable to show any sign of my anxious doubts concerning the actual sum that had been mentioned. I told Signor Pastrone that by the next day I would have referred the matter to D'Annunzio, but that, in view of my "chief's" temperament, I could not foretell the nature of his reply . . . I fixed an appointment with him for the following evening.

I took good care not to mention the subject to the Poet on that particular day, for even then I understood his mentality perfectly. If any sum were mentioned to D'Annunzio as the highest that could be offered, he would, two minutes later, regard it as the lowest he could accept; thus the whole business often went up in smoke, greatly to his own disadvantage.

The next evening I met Pastrone. I told him that I had not yet had a chance to refer our conversation to D'Annunzio, but this time, going again into the whole matter with him, as soon

as we reached the critical stage of mentioning the sum to be paid, I pricked up my ears like a donkey at feeding time.

The sum was named for the second time, and doubt fled before the second mention of the sum as 50,000 lire.

I took leave of Signor Pastrone, and the same evening transmitted his offer to D'Annunzio, or, to be more exact, conforming in this to established precedents, I first said that I had been offered 20,000. I waited until his pretensions had doubled this amount, allowed him a whole night to sleep on this proposal, and the next day pretended that I had fleeced Pastrone.

Once the contract had been signed, there began the inevitable correspondence, pitched in the usual minor key. The prompt execution of its terms was a matter of urgency, as, for Pastrone, loss of time also involved heavy loss of money.

The single means at my disposal to force the Poet to work was to make him understand that, in spite of the great deference, admiration, sympathy, and all the rest of it, of the two producers towards the great Italian poet, they would only part with that coveted cheque for 50,000 lire in exchange for a definite title and a complete set of captions.

When his hand was forced, D'Annunzio could show himself both understanding and reasonable. He accepted these conditions, and, with the help of the photographs and the already existing captions handed to me in Paris, at last set to work.

The finding of a title took him exactly ten minutes. To find titles represented for D'Annunzio not work but pleasure; names, surnames, titles—he must have invented 10,000 at least in the course of his literary career.

I believe that the film in its initial stage bore a simple name like *Love's Triumph*, or something similar. D'Annunzio smiled at so much ingenuousness and transformed it on the spot into *Cabiria*.

To those who know Greek, "Cabiria" means "Born of the Fire." Since it was a sonorous name, easy to remember and adaptable to all languages, this name was greeted with rapture by all those who were interested in the production.

The affair took a more complicated turn when it came to the names of the cast and the captions.

D'Annunzio has never been a man to improvise his work.

He likes first to indulge in meditation and documentation; for instance, he would not for a moment allow a Chaldean character to appear under a Carthaginian name, or a Hebrew under an Egyptian one. It would be an enormity in his eyes.

The preparatory work, therefore, took up a certain time. The life of the unfortunate Pastrone hung on D'Annunzio's every move. He had imagined that, with the help of a typist, D'Annunzio would have completed his task within three or four days. He found no peace, haunted my house, wired to Turin, and implored me to intercede for him with the Poet.

Finally, when his suffering had lasted over a fortnight, D'Annunzio solemnly declared that he was on the point of finishing, and just as solemnly Pastrone, made wise by experience, refused to credit his assurances. Moreover, he was so convinced that D'Annunzio's promise hid a plot, and that, indifferent to the temptation of the 50,000 lire, the Poet would take French leave at the last moment, that he planted himself in the ante-room of the Avenue Kléber, and from that moment refused to budge.

The reader must not take the last sentence as an exaggeration. Pastrone spent days and nights there! I do not know whether he obtained a mattress from D'Annunzio's valet, but I can affirm that at any hour of the day or night Pastrone could be found in the ante-room, relying on the porter, who supplied him with sandwiches at meal-times, to save him from starvation.

The Poet realised that in this particular instance Fate could not be evaded, and that, willy-nilly, he would be forced to earn his princely fee. In three days he finished *Cabiria*, which, without Pastrone's obstinacy, might perhaps never have seen the light of day, at least under the signature of Gabriele D'Annunzio. "A Greco-Roman-Punic drama in the style of *Quo Vadis?*"—thus it was to be qualified by D'Annunzio himself. It would have been sufficient for anyone who knew the man or the Poet to repudiate the idea of his being its sole author.

And now you know the true story of the great D'Annunzian film, I leave you to imagine with what moral satisfaction D'Annunzio listened to the eulogy of Porel, the famous director of the Vaudeville, whose opinion was shared by many others. "Your genius has once more strikingly manifested itself. *Cabiria* is a real masterpiece!"

Of all the work done by D'Annunzio for *Cabiria*, very little survived. The reader should not be astonished that it was written in French, because during the Poet's stay in France he often used to write even his personal notes in that language.

From the outline which I found among his papers I must deduce that D'Annunzio originally intended to write the whole scenario of *Cabiria*, or as much of it, at least, as could be adapted to the existing "rushes" taken by the "Itala Film," reserving the right to demand additions or modifications. But owing to the urgency of the matter, I suppose that he renounced this intention, merely giving Pastrone's production the benefit of the inimitable quality of his literary style.

Naturally, like a father who knows that his son is the offspring of his wife's illicit affections, and is unable, try as he may, to treat him like his other children, though no blame attaches to him, D'Annunzio never felt any affection for *Cabiria*, and consistently avoided seeing it.

He was punished for his lack of sympathy for this film when *Caprifoglio* had to be withdrawn from the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin in Paris, while *Cabiria* was creating a furore in the Italian picture theatres.

In answer to the representations made to him by the directors of that theatre, Herz and Coquelin, recommending him to prolong the run of his drama, D'Annunzio wrote them a letter in which he referred to the profits made by the film, and allowed it to be understood that his chief concern lay with the upkeep of his greyhounds, a concern which had urged him to write the famous scenario.

Since several papers printed the letter, Pastrone got wind of it and hastened to inform the Poet that this interpretation was little to his taste.

D'Annunzio, always ready to repair any damage he had inadvertently occasioned to others, made me publish a communication of a self-advertising character in the Paris newspapers. I quote it in its entirety because, though it appeared over my signature, D'Annunzio himself wrote it from the first word to the last.

In it he re-opened the argument about the dogs' meat, but the tone is cleverly modified, and for good reasons. This is the text:

"Incorrect notices have appeared in newspapers about the mediocre success of a film which a great Turin producer has made from a scenario of Gabriele D'Annunzio, on a scale hitherto unknown in Film-land.

"This report has arisen through the revolt of the Roman public against the clumsy impresario who had the audacity to demand the exorbitant prices to which audiences have learnt to submit on the first nights of the *Maestro's* dramas, for the mere showing of a film. Nevertheless, for the last fortnight in Rome, Naples, Milan and Turin the theatres have been invariably packed and crowds are being turned away from the doors.

"Besides, Signor D'Annunzio, who, whatever may be said to the contrary, is a sagacious man, would never have consented to make the fortunes of his solid kennels dependent on something so fragile and unstable as a film, were it three miles long.

"He received 100,000 francs on the delivery of the scenario, and thus secured at least six months' supply of good red meat for his greyhounds. The proof of *Cabiria's* great success lies in the fact that the same firm has requested the author of the *Caprifoglio* to write another scenario on the same terms with the additional payment of a percentage of the gross receipts. Therefore not only are the greyhounds assured of the famous red meat for half a year, but sweets, the yolk of eggs, and a century-old Cognac will also be provided for them on race-days."

I think it needless to add that the readers of French newspapers were satisfied with this letter, which faithfully copied the *Maestro's* style, while editorial offices even expressed the opinion that the Poet's secretary wielded as fluent a pen as his master.

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Concerning these far-off days it can only be affirmed that D'Annunzio's connection with the film world could be read in terms of uninterrupted proposals, counter-proposals, scenarios (no sooner drafted than abandoned), of advance payments (unattended by the delivery of manuscripts), and so forth. As D'Annunzio had formerly been in the habit, *in limite possessionis*, of promising a specially written comedy or tragedy to every actress who had no need to be beautiful as long as she was

pleasing, so, after *Cabiria*, he began to hold out to the stars and aspirants of the silent drama promises of unlimited and entirely new scenarios.

The ladies, as might have been expected, did not hesitate to spread the news among managers and producers. I leave you to imagine the consequence of such indiscretions in a circle as correct and austere as that of the cinema!

As a matter of fact, D'Annunzio created and wrote one scenario only, *La Crociata degli Innocenti*. *L'Uomo che rubò la Gioconda* was only a new interpretation, its plot having been taken from a story written by Pierre Lafitte, the editor of the *Excelsior*, who had intended to publish it in his own paper, but instead gave it to D'Annunzio, who altered and adapted it for screen purposes.

On the other hand, it is inexplicable that *L'Uomo che rubò la Gioconda* should have failed to appeal to those in search of film scenarios. The subject stands out vividly against the usual tiresome background of film stories to which America has inured our more delicate European palates. Apart from some necessary modifications and adaptations to which D'Annunzio would certainly have given his consent, it possesses all the requisite interest for the public, and if we call to mind that after *Cabiria* (which was an unparalleled and resounding success) D'Annunzio never put his hand to another film, I am forced to conclude that if it has found no purchaser to this day, the cause must be sought in the congenital and incurable lack of sense displayed, with a few rare exceptions, by the managers and producers of the great cinematographic companies.

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The war arrested D'Annunzio's activities with regard to scenario-writing as it had arrested his literary production. It was only at Fiume that it suddenly seemed as though he wished to resurrect the former in the novel and unforeseen shape of a "Fiume film."

This time, too, I was in charge of the negotiations, and am therefore in a position to describe a curious series of events which throw an admirable light on D'Annunzio's singular temperament.

Two Americans, of unimpeachable reputation both as regards the seriousness of their proposals and their financial standing (moreover, guaranteed by the famous architect, Whitney Warren, a particular friend of D'Annunzio's), came to see me at Fiume at the Hôtel Europa in the spring of 1920, and made me the following business proposal for D'Annunzio.

The Poet was to undertake the completion of a film dealing with Fiume within three months of the signing of the contract.

By a "Fiume film" they meant a dramatic subject laid in Fiume, with its feverishly pulsating life of the moment. They were to operate the camera themselves, even without the conscious participation of the *Comandante*. This was extremely easy, for he daily passed in review the legionaries and the *arditi*, received deputations, visited advance posts, traversed the city by automobile and on foot, was present at military displays, presided in state at all kinds of official gatherings and harangued the crowd from the balcony of the Government Palace. Nothing, therefore, was easier for the film operators than to follow him about for a few weeks as he carried out his multiple duties.

With regard to the Poet himself, his whole work was to consist of writing some twenty or thirty pages upon some passionate *leit motiv*, according to his inspiration.

This represented an infinitely less tiring and less complex process than the composition of a novel, and the Poet could have concluded it successfully in three or four days of assiduous effort. As I have pointed out before, the most important part of D'Annunzio's work lay in its mental preparation, even though the subject might be a hundred times more complicated and of greater importance to his literary reputation than the mere writing of scenarios.

When I informed the *Comandante* of the presence in Fiume of the two Americans, and of their proposal, he answered: "*Go ahead, and base your negotiations on a minimum of 200,000 lire, because (and you know it) I am in urgent need of money*"—which was not only nothing new for either of us, but happened at that moment to be absolutely true.

From that day I ate with the two Americans, I smoked with the two Americans, I walked with the two Americans, and I played upon them to such an extent that, banking on their

enthusiasm, which I had fanned into flame, I persuaded them (naturally after having conferred with the *Comandante*) to prepare the draft of a contract according to which, at the moment of delivery of the manuscript, they would remit to Gabriele D'Annunzio a sum of 800,000 lire cash down—considering the times, simply a fabulous sum!

And with this agreement, which had cost me ten days' hard work, drafted and stamped and wanting only the signatures of the contracting parties, I introduced my Americans into the presence of the *Comandante*. They were as thrilled over the visit as Mussulmans longing for the black stone of Mecca.

The *Comandante* received them at the Government Palace in his private study next to his bedroom. It was the room where he used to discuss the most secret affairs of the Regency, where he organised the military and political juggleries which permitted his legionaries to amuse themselves for two years at the expense of the whole of Europe. At last, when agreement had been reached through a process of mutual exhaustion, the contract was signed. Rarely in my life have I seen D'Annunzio more pleased with a business deal. The mirage of the huge sum, bordering on a million lire, which he could make in a few days, seemed to have made him twenty years younger. It should be remembered that the conquest of Fiume had entailed upon the Poet a complete stoppage of literary activities and, in consequence, had caused a financial disaster of the first magnitude. Comparable in this to a Garibaldi rather than to a Cortez or a Pizarro, he had never drawn any material advantages from his exceptional and almost fabulous position.

At least one of the American men of business left Fiume a few days later in exactly the same frame of mind as D'Annunzio—that is, convinced that he had discovered a sure fount of future benefits and brought off a magnificent *coup*. For my part, I received from D'Annunzio a splendid cigarette case as a reward for my days of honest labour. I keep it to this day, and on it are engraved the following words, in the *Comandante's* writing: "*Fiume ignis, caetera fumus*" ("*Fiume is fire, the rest is smoke*").

It will be seen a little later that of the three I was to be the only one to draw any benefit from this business. One of the most

astounding contracts of D'Annunzio's career was to go up in smoke, actually like the "*fumus*." Once the American had left, with the understanding that he would come back to Fiume a month later in order to "turn" the episodes which were to form the frame of the scenario, D'Annunzio spent four days shut up in his apartments, hardly seeing anyone. I naturally attributed this fact to that state of mental fermentation which preceded any literary output of D'Annunzio, but I was mistaken. After a few days, taking advantage of a favourable occasion, I broached the subject and found that he had not yet, as he used to say jokingly, "focused his mind." He added that he stood in need of great mental repose, and, above all, of absolute and undisturbed isolation for at least a week, if he desired to achieve a favourable result.

As Fiume was then passing through a peaceful phase, I advised D'Annunzio to hand over the discharge of all current affairs to General Coccherini, who enjoyed his full confidence, and to submit himself to a period of absolute seclusion, which advice he followed.

Another week went by, during which the *Comandante* remained almost invisible.

When he once more took up contact with the outside world I promptly went to see him, my heart full of the pleasantest anticipations. But it did not take me long to read his face: it had the indefinable expression worn by those who are surprised in wrong-doing. It is particularly noticeable in school-children who have shirked their home-work.

D'Annunzio, though shamefacedly admitting that he had not done a stroke of work before, of course blamed every circumstance but the real one for his failure to take advantage of his tranquil retreat. The real reason (there was no need for him to explain it—it had operated so often before) was that D'Annunzio, as we have seen, could not be induced, at any price, to do work that he did not wish to do; and, to his misfortune, the wish to do this particular piece of work never materialised, either then or later!

And so the 800,000 lire most regrettably remained in the pockets of the Americans!

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D'Annunzio's attitude towards the recent productions of the cinema and to their famous interpreters, whose names he only knew by hearsay, is extremely curious.

Once, in my double capacity of friend and manager of a film company, I presented to D'Annunzio some few dozen of the best-known and most successful American, French, German and Russian films.

In the unruffled calm of the Vittoriale, on more than twenty consecutive nights, from 9 p.m. until 2 a.m., only the *Comandante*, myself, my daughter, and various servants of both sexes being present (as D'Annunzio, in his inexhaustible kindness, gathered them round him whenever he could make them share in his relaxations), the Poet lived in the company of Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Harold Lloyd, Brigitte Helm, Charlie Chaplin, Dolores del Rio, Adolphe Menjou, and Greta Garbo.

In my opinion his judgment was of great interest, not only because it expressed an entirely personal point of view, but even more so because, up till then, apart from the tragedy *La Nave*, interpreted by Ida Rubinstein and artistically directed and produced by his son, Gabriellino, he had only seen a few quite unimportant films.

The films were, of course, projected without any musical accompaniment, and, therefore, lacked any kind of allure. The most absolute silence was preserved, a silence only interrupted by an occasional word from D'Annunzio.

Rarely have I seen him more captivated by a performance.

No single detail escaped him; often he insisted on having a film, or at least the principal part of it, presented to him a second time. What most surprised and interested him was the perfection reached on the technical side, and the possibilities of an even more daring interpretation. He could not believe his eyes, so extraordinarily impressed was he by the resourcefulness of the producers. He said laughingly: "*I would be unable to invent anything like it.*"

Of all the famous stars who appeared on the screen, the one who interested him least was Mary Pickford. He said: "*She has a mouth which lacks expression and has ungraceful lines.*" But even if this statement comes to the ears of the famous star, it need not

disturb her. I know nothing of her private life, not having the honour of her acquaintance, but to him she is indubitably the mildest of film stars, because she corresponds least to his feminine ideals. As we know, he likes in women everything that is complicated and exceptional, and considers simplicity, sweetness, artlessness and ingenuousness—Mary Pickford's chief attributes—as secondary qualifications. Neither must it be forgotten that, apart from being a man, he is also a creator, and that, considered from this point of view, Mary Pickford's gifts could in no way help him to incarnate a single one of the beings who have sprung from his fantasy.

Naturally, he found Dolores del Rio and Brigitte Helm very interesting; but inevitably his greatest admiration went out to Greta Garbo.

Apart from the artistic pleasure with which she provided him, he owed a certain gratitude to Dolores del Rio, because, as he said, "*I have at last mastered the entire subject of Resurrection by Tolstoi, which I never had the patience to read to the end!*"

Of all the films which we showed to him, those which most captured his imagination and interest were *Metropolis* and *Siegfried*, produced by Ufa, and the Russian film taken from the novel by Gorki, *Mother*. Charlie Chaplin he set in a class apart, for, after seeing the *Gold Rush* and the *Circus*, he considered him as an exceptional artist, although he reproached him for his too faithful adherence to a single type. He wrote jokingly to my daughter on the morning following that on which he saw Charlie, in answer to my invitation over the telephone to an excursion, "*Dear Fiumanella, I discovered when I woke up that I had Chaplin's feet and was unable to walk.*" *Metropolis* struck him especially from the point of view of technique, so that he asked for it to be projected twice. In order to demonstrate to us what an impression this film had made upon him at our last sitting, he sent us from the library, to which he had retired to rest before going to bed, a brief note in which he wrote: "*I wish you all good night. I am in the darkness between the robot and kindness. Ariel.*" He greatly enjoyed the fanciful interpretation of Douglas Fairbanks, and shook with laughter like a child at the antics of Harold Lloyd in the famous film, *Safety First*.

A short time after these cinematographic displays, it seemed

that D'Annunzio was about to take a serious interest, if not in the creation of new scenarios, at least in the adaptation of plots taken from his works. I imagined that he would himself assume the task of supervising such production, according to the new idea and the new possibilities with which the sight of the films which I had brought to the Vittoriale had inspired him.

This is what he wrote to a friend who was at that time at the head of a great film company, and who wished to acquire the subject of the *Pisanella* so as to adapt it for a film.

"The retina of my right eye, which is not yet entirely healed, is a register of inchoate impressions! During our long evenings of film projections, a thousand images have superimposed themselves upon persistent flashes of blindness.

"I have lived in constant hallucinations. Even to-night, Zorro and Alberic occupied the chamber of sleep without giving me peace." This is an allusion to the film *The Son of Zorro*, created by Douglas Fairbanks, and to Alberic in the film of Siegfried.

"I have been unable to take stock of the limits which this art of velocity has reached, but I know that it is only at the beginning of its career.

"You know that all my life the bow of Ulysses always stood close to my hand.

"Here I find it near me again.

"As at the time of Cabiria, upon me there is imposed the task of overstepping the boundaries which have already been reached. I am beginning to ponder, to search, to experiment. May the tenth Muse, Kenesis, assist me! I have told Tom that I would be very pleased if you would make the attempt to breathe new life into my 'Pisanella,' which I consider the most plastic of all my poems. If the great Bakst were still alive, with what ardour he would have helped us!"

This letter, which is dated the 7th December, 1928, might have led to tangible results if it had not been followed by the dissolution of the Italian film company which had embodied the hopes of cinematographic art in Italy, thus also destroying D'Annunzio's latest project. It proved also a great loss to Italian art, because D'Annunzio always manifested a very strong

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interest for the film, so that even during the war (1916) he wrote to me with regard to the adaptation of *Saint-Sébastien*:

"It will really be necessary after the war to found a film company in order to produce four or five films according to my theories. The cinematographic art is still in its infancy."

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOMES OF THE POET

How D'Annunzio built up a home and destroyed it—His respect for Saint-Sébastien—The "Domus aurea"—D'Annunzio lives dangerously—Helen of Troy's bedroom—The Poet leaves the kingdom of shadows—Three of the Poet's houses pillaged—On the shore of the vast Atlantic—"It is I who am always the scape-goat!"—Duplicated bedrooms—The journeys of Fernand Cortez—The courteous mayor of Bordeaux—D'Annunzio is the host of four Austrians—A disappointed old lady—The screens and the stuffed birds—The strange story of a house called "Seraglio"—The "Firm" of D'Annunzio.

FEW men in the world have successively created and destroyed as many homes as Gabriele D'Annunzio—and since the creation of a home and the creation of a book follow a rhythm and a procedure which are singularly alike, it is fortunate for humanity that his literary work has been published in thousands of copies, and so preserved for posterity. Otherwise, as of his homes there remains to-day only the Vittoriale, so of his works there would remain only the last to be created.

Let us now see how the Poet creates and destroys a home, but at the outset it would be well for me to have an understanding with my readers as to the interpretation to be given to those two words.

Normally, and for most people, to "create" a house means to build it; to "destroy" it, means to pull it down. But, in fact, D'Annunzio has never thought of either process. He has contented himself always with redecorating and refurnishing, to his own fancy, the furnished houses which he has rented. Such improvements have usually cost three times the original value of the house; and then, after one, two, three or ten years, as the case might be, he has calmly abandoned all the objects accumulated during his tenancy when financial or moral reasons have induced him to change his abode.

It is in this and no other sense that the terms "to create" and "to destroy" exist in his dictionary.

"And may it be known to whomever loves me that of every home that has been destroyed I have always been able to carry away the stone which bears engraved on it the enigma of my liberty: 'Who shall keep me chained?'"

* * * * *

Among the numerous homes of D'Annunzio, who is, by nature, a nomad (but as a snail is a nomad, which moves slowly and ponderously), we must distinguish between his permanent residences and those which are of less interest because he only made transient use of them, occupying them under special conditions and at definite moments during his career. The former, glorified and embellished by legend, are four in number: the famous Capponcina on the Florentine Hills, the Chalet Saint-Dominique at Arcachon in the French Landes, the Casetta Rossa on the Grand Canal at Venice, and finally the Vittoriale on Lake Garda.

Amongst the latter we have: the apartment in the Palazzo Zuccari in the Trinità dei Monti in Rome, the Versiliana on the Tyrrhenean Sea, the Villa delle Tempeste at Bocca d'Arno, Villa Charitas at Arcachon, the Hôtel du Luxembourg in the rue Geoffroy L'Asnier in Paris, and, during the war, the house of Cervignano.

Among even more transitory residences there are the apartment in Via Gregoriana in Rome, where he wrote *Giovanni Episcopo*, and another in Rome in Via delle Finanze; the so-called "saddlery" at Palazzo Borghese; and an isolated little villa standing in the middle of the pines in the Versilia at a place called "Il Secco," where he wrote the major part of *Francesca da Rimini*; the apartments at 47, Avenue Kléber and 8, rue de Bassano in Paris; the Government Palace at Fiume; and the *appartement* in Palazzo Barberigo delle Terrazze in Venice.

Finally there are three mysterious abodes: the villa called "Il Seraglio" at Madero on the Lago di Garda, a little house at Assisi, and a tower situated on Lago Maggiore. Each has its story, its romance; nearly all of them saw the inception of some D'Annunzian masterpiece.

At the Capponcina D'Annunzio wrote sixty per cent of his masterpieces (*Laus Vitæ*, *Francesca*, *Il Fuoco*, etc.), and loved not

only Eleonora Duse but that other famous woman whom he knew as Nike, and numberless ladies, important and unimportant, amongst whom it is difficult to distinguish with any precision.

At the Chalet Saint-Dominique nearly all his French books were written: it was also the scene of his affair with Donatella, the beautiful foreigner who played so important a part in his life. He composed three-quarters of the *Saint-Sébastien* at Villa Charitas, the threshold of which—whether out of reverence for the Saint or for what other reason I know not—was never crossed by a woman.

During that brief period the adventures of the Poet unrolled themselves at the Grand Hôtel d'Arcachon, which for three months represented the erotic annexe of his mystic dwelling-place among the pines.

At the Casetta Rossa he wrote *Notturmo*, and had a love-affair with a Venetian lady who, following the precepts of Nietzsche, "diverted the hero after the battle," and whom he conscientiously betrayed with other ladies just as charming and no less Venetian than she.

At the Vittoriale he has written *Il Venturiero senza Ventura*, *Il Compagno degli Occhi senza Ciglia*, etc., and just as he has always "dared the undarable," so, in the strictly etymological sense of the word, he has loved the lovable, because the number of his regular and irregular guests of Italian, French, Anglo-Saxon, and even Mexican extraction is countless.

At the Palazzo Zuccari he wrote *Il Piacere*, and loved, amongst many others, "*the lady of the immense eyes*," who is still alive and has certainly not forgotten *Andrea Sperelli*.

At the Villa della Tempeste, at Bocca d'Arno, he wrote *Forse che sì, forse che no*, and conceived fierce passion for an Italian countess.

At the Avenue Kléber he composed *Cabiria*, and loved at least one "Cabiria" each month he spent there, some eight in all.

At the Boulevard Montparnasse he had an affair with a mulatto woman, while at the Hôtel du Luxembourg he wrote the *Oration of Quarto* and indulged in an intrigue with a Portuguese lady . . . who, by a fortunate dispensation, has not transmitted his letters to posterity.

At the Seraglio, in spite of the fateful name, the sultan was austere. There, for the whole year and a half that it was in his possession, he wrote nothing and loved no one, limiting himself . . . to gathering passing flowers. . . .

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With the final relinquishing of the famous Villa Capponcina in 1910, it may be said that D'Annunzio's first phase ended and that a new D'Annunzio was born.

This truth was quickly grasped by the Italian public, grasped so firmly, in fact, that, in spite of D'Annunzio's frequent changes, and of the fact that he modified and embellished each new home on preconceived lines and in a precisely similar fashion, they insisted, at a time long before the Vittoriale was thought of, on regarding the Capponcina—rather than either of its predecessors or its successors (some of which were perhaps even more in the public eye)—as the one real and true home of the Poet.

This was, in fact, the typical house of the Poet, the "*Domus aurea*" of the æsthete and the superman, of the lover of sensations, of the "*des Esseintes*"—in a word, of that long D'Annunzian period which began timidly in Rome in 1890 and which flickered out at the first trumpet call of the European war.

The other houses which he inhabited were copies, modest or sumptuous, of the Capponcina, save, of course, for the addition, after 1915, of the warlike and Fiuman decorative element which in those latter years played so large a part in the life and in the psyche of D'Annunzio—I mean the flags, poignards, proclamations, medals, rifles, machine-guns, aeroplane propellers, etc., which from then on completed the decoration of his rooms.

But the basis remained always the same, and the arrangements identical. Even though we go back to his most youthful and squalid lodgings, "*in days of splendid poverty, even the squalor had something artistic about it!*"

In the ancient and vast "saddlery" of the Palazzo Borghese, transformed by him in 1894 into a combined bed-sitting-room, what do we find? A divan-bed with its cushions of cheap

damask, a grand piano (naturally on hire), an antique bench piled with books, and a plaster torso of the "Belvedere" of Michelangelo. *"In these days of splendid poverty I was living in the old saddlery of the Borghese, between Ripetta and the Palace, between the river and 'that great silver clavichord' celebrated in a sonnet of adolescence. The empty princely saddlery was of such boundless size that it recalled the Paduan salon of the Palazzo della Ragione, for it did not lack over its door the stone of the infamous 'lapis vituperii et cessionis bonorum.' In this vastness I had only a bed with neither head nor foot to it, a pianoforte, a bench, a plaster cast of the torso of the 'Belvedere,' and the joy of breathing with full lungs."*

Although he affirmed that the "grandeur of the herculean torso was sufficient to fill his walls," it is certain that his furniture was on the modest side. Nevertheless, it already contained the germs and elements which, multiplied by a thousand, will be found in all the succeeding habitations of the Poet. Even the Vittoriale, the most complete and artistically beautiful, the most heroic, let us call it, of his dwellings, merely reproduces once more the contents and the general aspects of the early Capponcina, and suffers, too, even more than the others, from D'Annunzio's usual defect of overcrowding his rooms, to a maddening extent, with miscellaneous objects. The Capponcina, which to-day is destroyed (I refer to that created and transformed by D'Annunzio), was at the time when he fell in love with it what it probably is to-day: the country house of a Florentine gentleman, situated in an enchanting position on the hills of Settignano dominating the marvellous crescent in which is cupped the beauty of Florence. It belonged to the Marchese Viviani della Robbia, who bore in Florence the nickname of 'the vulgarian Marquis,' a nickname which, in its most indulgent interpretation, was meant to criticise his contempt for the social amenities of life, an attitude which must have made him look with disfavour on the Poet, who was famous even then for his innate courtesy and his insistence on formality.

Nevertheless, the rough Marquis and the delicate artist soon came to an agreement, and D'Annunzio took up his residence in his new house.

It was furnished in a modest manner and lacked the barest comforts. As it then stood, it would at best have suited a

married couple blessed with a large family, and lovers of solitude and peace rather than refinement.

In a very short time, with the help of the Florentine antiquaries mobilised by the Poet, it was to be transformed into a sumptuous and original artistic home with the aspect of a fourteenth-century museum, where authentic antiques were set alongside suits of armour, where reproductions of the most famous masterpieces of the world lived in amity with the terracottas of Lucca della Robbia, and with Persian carpets, and where tens of thousands of sumptuously bound volumes were set off by damask and rare brocades.

But while the Capponcina, as we note (completely realising those old-time dreams of D'Annunzio's in which, as a young poet without a penny in his pocket, he sang pæans to "*deep and profound damask-covered couches*," to "*scarlet cushions*," and to "*fine linen*"), was a veritable temple of art and exquisite elegance, five of its rooms especially—the refectory, the hall, the library, his bedroom and one guest-room, called the "Room of the Hermit"—displayed in all their brilliance D'Annunzio's prodigious fantasy and his gifts as a decorator.

When the Capponcina was sold at auction, the mere enumeration of the objects of art which it contained filled a catalogue of over twenty pages. To describe them in detail for the reader would, therefore, be an impossible and monotonous task.

As I mentioned before, the general note of the decorations was that of the fourteenth century; the colours prevalent in the tapestries and the materials were blood-red and lime-green. The drawing-room—richly furnished with divans, and cushions of rare brocade and Hellenic bronzes, overshadowed by a gigantic reproduction of the "Prisoner" of Michelangelo—communicated with the refectory and gave on to a veranda with a pergola of wistaria. The Poet's bedroom, under the ægis of another master (a reproduction of the Auriga of Delphi, whose deep-set eyes seemed to gaze at the vast bed, covered likewise with antique damask), contained a few priceless pieces of the same epoch—an admirable Flemish canvas representing a galleon in a tempest, a tall sculptured wardrobe, a chest of drawers and a mask of Wagner, a gift from Cosima, wife of the great composer.

The library, on the shelves of which were ranged over 14,000 volumes, illuminated by small lamps hidden in clepsydras of yellow glass, contained other furniture and damascened weapons, and, amongst others, a superb desk of beautiful fourteenth-century design on which, during his tenancy of the Villa, the Poet composed all the literary work that flowed from his pen in the space of ten years.

In the dining-room, which served also as an entrance hall, apart from a long refectory table surrounded by stalls, which occupied one corner and was used at meals, there was an imposing superstructure, built expressly by order of the Poet, which hid a pianola from the visitor's sight.

In the room of the Hermit, which had offered hospitality to Eleanora Duse, the four corners were ornamented by superb busts of the Renaissance. The bed was covered with a splendid brocade into which were woven golden lilies. At its two sides were suspended the Greek verses of the Iliad, copied by D'Annunzio, celebrating the appearance of the divine Helen of Sparta.

From one of the walls covered with green damask hung the frowning mask of Beethoven.

In this villa, which the Malatesta di Rimini or Bentivoglio di Bologna would certainly have found to their taste and befitting their splendour, Gabriele D'Annunzio passed nearly a decade of his life, served by fifteen domestics and surrounded by ten horses, thirty greyhounds, two fox-terriers, one spaniel and more than 200 pigeons: working and loving restlessly, venturing out rarely and then on horseback; seeing guests at rare intervals, and spending at least ten times what he was earning.

He wrote later, recalling those times: *"In that villa, in order to satisfy one of the spirits which then held sway over me, I re-discovered without effort the habits and the tastes of gentlemen of the Renaissance, living in beautiful surroundings amongst their books and horses."*

Serene and aloof, unperturbed by the financial clouds which were massing above his head, he continued through all these years to "live dangerously," not only buying objects of every kind without thought of the morn, but pulling down walls, modifying the structure of the Villa, modernising it completely,

building on new wings, adding to it stables, kennels and pigeon-cotes, and embellishing the garden with statues, flowers and beautiful grilles.

But when he had accumulated over a million of debts—a sum which at that time was equivalent to five millions to-day, and no one was willing to give him credit any longer—the storm broke.

It was a hopeless undertaking for him to try to placate with soft words and promises a pack of usurers more hungry than his greyhounds. Equally useless was it for him to write to high personalities begging them to help him temporarily over his financial difficulties, or to request facilities at least for deferred payments, which would have allowed him to save the historic residence.

All Italy remained indifferent to his appeal and was a mute spectator to his senseless Vandalism; his dear confrères, scattered in ten thousand cafés on the Peninsula, rubbed their hands with ill-restrained joy, savouring in anticipation the definite downfall of the competitor who stood in their way.

Then, weary of the battle, the Poet abandoned the Florentine inferno, as Orpheus had abandoned the Kingdom of Shadows, leaving as guardian his faithful lawyer, Coselschi of Florence, that he might try and avert total ruin; but everything was in vain. He wrote to D'Annunzio enumerating all the steps taken by the creditors, which followed on each other with ferocious implacability, and he concluded: "I no longer know how to stem such a disaster. Why do we not decide to sell out and thus end it? You sacrifice and weaken yourself in a vain attempt to sustain a fight in which you go on losing considerable money in facing all these litigations.

"Before consenting to a sale at the hand of auctioneers, with all the usual *clamour*, let us sell it amicably. We had a propitious occasion. . . .

"You are in France for some time and are likely to stay there. In these conditions there is nothing wrong in your desiring to sell anything that is superfluous.

"Let us sell and put this procedure in trustworthy hands; take a decision for your own salvation."

On the 24th April, 1910, the Capponcina was put up for auction, amidst the smiles of the antique dealers and money-

lenders, who got their money back three hundred times, and the indifference of some stray onlookers.

Amongst these was a German, a lover of Italy and an admirer of the Poet. This stranger bought the mask of Wagner, and some time after sent it back as an act of homage to the Poet.

It was the only kindly gesture in the whole opprobrious episode.

* * * * *

"Public sales have always a singular aspect, but this is more curious, more sad, than others. As the rooms are crowded, the buyers are huddled together and strain towards the expert entrusted with the bidding. It is not a chosen public—five or six connoisseurs are scattered among a crowd of dealers. From this mass of bodies there rises an odour which makes breathing difficult. The windows are closed and one can feel the July morning blazing on the pavements and on the walls outside.

"The bronzes, enamels, the ivories, the damascened boxes, the small jade idols, the cups of Satzuma, the vases of metal worked in yellow, the most divers knick-knacks pass from hand to hand. It would be possible to make a subtle study of the expressions of these hands which measure the value of everything by touch. There is the hand which trembles slightly when it takes hold of a beautiful and precious thing; there is the hand which passes caressingly with a sort of voluptuous delicacy over an object, polishing a relief to give it better light, stroking a curve to measure its smoothness, tapping it to test the ring of the metal, following the chasing in its finest lines, gently, slowly, as though it were the body of a woman; there is the harsh hand which tosses the object in its palm, only caring about its weight; there is the hand which prods at certain spots, caring only about the resistance."

"They deliberate, they deliberate. The hammer falls, and the object is carried off by the highest bidder. The various things disappear, and, room after room, the house becomes naked and poor.

"A great melancholy invades the soul in face of this spectacle. The buyers go down the steps laughing and chattering, holding in their hands such acquisitions as they can carry, on their faces the fierce joy of possession."

"Few of them think that these objects have been collected lovingly and lovingly cared for; few are searching in this despoiled house for any vestige of that love, that care, that preference, that taste . . ."

So in 1885, D'Annunzio described in a newspaper article an auction of the contents of the Palazzo del Grillo in Rome. He certainly did not imagine, then, that it was the unconscious forecast of the sale of his favourite home.

Whilst D'Annunzio was in France he was able to follow, day by day, in the Italian newspapers the disorderly dispersion of all the rare and valued things which he had abandoned at the Capponcina in such royal fashion, making no attempt to conceal or carry away with him any solitary thing, which would have been extraordinarily easy and which he had been advised to do.

I, who was his companion, never heard from him recrimination or blame—never once.

His gift of always being able to rise like the phoenix from its ashes did not fail him even on this occasion.

He did not even deplore the past, and only mentioned the "sale" on a single occasion at the Hôtel Diena. He looked up from reading the *Corriere* and said to me indifferently as though speaking of some ordinary newspaper item:

"Have you seen that they have sold my desk for 5,000 lire? I only paid 1,500 for it. Do you remember? I did not think that I had made so good a bargain." Some time afterwards he wrote with a flourish: *"How facile was the spoliation of property, how almost without a shadow of regret! It was proved that the magnificence of my mode of living did not lie in my valets and in my horses. A crowd of apes trampled underfoot and slowly destroyed that which, sooner or later, I would have destroyed myself in an hour, to make room for my impatient thought. At first it seemed as though their action offended me, and then I became aware that it by no means offended me. Having lost a beautiful though worm-eaten carving, a beautiful though cracked glass, a beautiful though rusty sword, I came into possession of this even more beautiful truth: It is necessary to burn or dismantle the old roof under which we live in the flesh and in the spirit. The only things that were taken from me were the joy and the pride of voluntary destruction."*

In the course of D'Annunzio's life, the sacked houses have been three in number.

The first, a small house decorated in Japanese style, which the Poet possessed on the shore of the Adriatic, was conscientiously emptied to its last Satzuma cup by the mistress whom he had the imprudence to leave in occupation on his departure—so, at least, he told me, but it is impossible for me to corroborate this statement, since the incident took place twenty years before my father met my mother.

The second was the Capponcina. The third was a small house at Cervignano which he inhabited during the war, and which, in the days of the retreat of Caporetto, was invaded by enemy officers who were delighted to take away relics in token of remembrance of the great *condottiere* who commanded the raid on Vienna.

* * * * *

When, one year after the destruction of the Capponcina, D'Annunzio, under the name of Guy d'Arbres, set foot for the first time in the Villa Saint-Dominique at Moulleau, "*on the shore of the vast resounding Atlantic*," he harboured no intention of turning it into a permanent residence. The mere thought of a new home terrified him.

In that villa he was the guest of a friend, a comrade in art, the American painter, Madame Brooks, and he did not, at first, intend that his stay should last longer than a few weeks at the most.

He had just miraculously escaped the lure of Paris, and, on his arrival in the Atlantic seclusion of Moulleau, he felt like a convict at large. Never had he aspired more greatly to solitude and peace.

"*I have left Paris*," he wrote to Emilio Treves at Milan, "*after four months of an infernal life. I arrived in my refuge conscious of so grave a loss of strength that, at certain moments, I really feel like ending it all.*"

"*But you know the tremendous resilience of my nature. A few weeks of rest and solitude, of peaceful meditation and of gentle dreaming, have brought me convalescence. And I feel as if I had recovered from some fatal illness.*"

In those same days he wrote to me in Paris: "*This place is admirable: my thirst for the sun begins to calm down. Au revoir.*"

The house won his approval because it was spacious, isolated from other villas, facing the sea, and surrounded on three sides by dense pine forests.

In spite of the pleasure he found in the society of his fellow-artist, a hundred imponderable circumstances attendant on that constant companionship, and the deference inevitably due to a hostess, could hardly fail to produce a certain mental strain; and D'Annunzio, who could never endure such ceremony with anyone for more than two or three days—even his intimacy with his mistresses putting no such strain on him—was certain to tire of it.

He tired, in fact, so rapidly that, on some excuse or other, he one day left the *chalet* and took up his abode in a villa much smaller and more modest, where he was entirely on his own.

It was not till five months later that he returned to the Villa Saint-Dominique (this time alone) and began to entertain the idea of making it, at least for a time, into a regular home. I believe that at the moment he was thinking only of a stay of six to seven months; instead, he remained there seven years, and retained the villa, but without living in it, for another twelve.

* * * * *

Whenever D'Annunzio proposed to write a new work, to refurnish an apartment or to conquer a city, he always prefaced the resolution by a long period of self-communing and of meticulous mental and material preparation.

He foresaw everything, and organised everything with a care and an attention to detail truly remarkable. He disliked giving his full confidence to anyone, and it must be admitted that whenever circumstances forced such a course upon him, he invariably had cause to repent having done so. He used to say, "*I am the scapegoat. It is my destiny that everything falls on my shoulders.*" And yet, it was not always he who was to blame.

Once he had made up his mind and laid his plans, he kept his intentions strictly to himself, or gave entirely false information concerning them, after which he set to work methodically and untiringly.

Even had D'Annunzio lived in a house for thirty years, the decoration and furnishing of it would have taken almost as long. The rearranging of details, the reallocation of rooms, the various alterations were at first unceasing and of daily occurrence. The steady flow of new objects, either purchased or received as gifts, and a mania for perfection favoured this incessant labour of embellishment and super-decoration.

Afterwards we could observe the same phenomenon which occurred so regularly with his literary activities; that is, that the pleasure and interest he showed while he was creating lapsed as soon as creation was completed.

The new villa called forth phenomena precisely similar to those already witnessed at the Capponcina, at Marina di Pisa, at the Versiliana, and, in fact, at every residence which he had first selected for occupation.

First period: æsthetic disinfection.

Since D'Annunzio has never been able to bear the idea of living with mediocre or with what is known as *bourgeois* furniture, or surrounded by worn carpets or hangings which offended alike his hygienic scruples and his æsthetic sense, he always began by relegating to the attics everything that disturbed his love of comfort. In the end hardly anything remained of the original installation, though it often happened, on the other hand, that he retained for his own use precisely those pieces to which the owner attached no value whatever.

I would like to take the occasion of remarking that D'Annunzio only leased furnished houses, and, invariably acting as though entrusted with a higher mission by Providence, at once set about refurnishing the whole place from top to bottom with his own possessions, although, of course, he continued to pay rent for a *furnished* house.

This strangeness can be explained by the fact that empty houses have always held a definite terror for him, and the mere thought of completely furnishing one of these would not only have robbed him of his sleep but effectually prevented him from carrying out any such programme. This, however, has never prevented his spending, in the process of adapting it to his taste, twice the initial value, not only of the contents, but of the house itself.

During that period, in order to disguise the most appalling of the "horrors," D'Annunzio would call to his aid materials, silks, brocades, cushions, carpets and books which, if he had not brought them with him, were sent to him from one of his depositories; the next step was to buy up all the available flower vases in the place.

During those first days of readjustment the apartments took on a curious look of gradual nudity—a few rugs on the floor, here and there a table or an armchair, entirely covered with damask of some faded colouring, a few vases, everywhere books and flowers. Nothing else.

D'Annunzio's first care has always been devoted to his bedroom and dressing-room. Almost invariably the former dining-room has been transformed into the bedroom and the hall used as dining-room. This is a detail entirely due to the D'Annunzian psyche.

We now come to the second period, entirely devoted to the study of catalogues. D'Annunzio applied to the nearest or most important town for an urgent delivery of catalogues, including those of decorative art, furniture dealers, cabinet makers, lighting apparatus, glass manufactories, antiquaries, libraries, and even museums. These he would study, collate, compile and annotate for days on end, not disdaining meanwhile humbler occupations, such as ordering house linen. *"I want you to buy me (there is a big lamp shop—Boler, I believe) three small oil lamps, of pretty shape, brass, nickel, not hand lamps but with a reservoir system, shades of porcelain or silk, yellow or pink, and if there are none of this colour, then green will do."*

"Go to the Maison de Blanc, Boulevard des Capucines, and buy (and bring with you) 8 table cloths, number 923 in the catalogue (200/200) at 27 francs each, and three dozen assorted napkins (70/80) at 45 francs a dozen. I have hardly any table linen."

In the third period, the installation being complete in its broader lines, D'Annunzio would begin to take a personal interest in small purchases. Every day he returned bringing with him endless bibelots, perfume-burners, vases and other articles, which he painstakingly distributed all over the house, trying to "populate" the barest patches. He has always had this mania. Recalling the first years of his youth, he wrote: *"I often*

wanted to ransack, pilfer and rummage among the Jewish old clothes men in the Campo dei Fiori, in order to find medals, coins, statues, reliefs and intaglios . . ."

In the fourth period, D'Annunzio devoted his time to designing and ordering of furniture, made according to his own plans, and to the acquisition of an innumerable multitude of cushions of every description, size, colour and shape.

Thus we reach the fifth, or last period. In the course of the latter, he first disposed all his new belongings, arranging and rearranging them continually, bringing to this task daily additions in the shape of hundreds of ornaments, vases, cushions, ancient carpets, antique engravings and thousands of books. "*The plaster casts have arrived,*" he wrote to me in 1911, when he received them from the Musée du Louvre, "*and I am so happy that I want to have them at once. Have them transported without fail to Saint-Dominique.*"

After that, he sprinkled all the materials with essence and rare perfumes, lighting incense-burners here and there—and the house was ready. But let us understand this clearly: it was only ready *inside*.

After that, he passed to the exterior, and—a curious but distressing circumstance—the simpler the character of embellishments, the heavier did their cost become, since with the princely indifference displayed by some rich landowner in reshaping an avenue, D'Annunzio would as calmly alter the entire lie of a garden as he would have knocked down walls and ceilings.

With a smile on his lips and his pocket-book constantly in his hands, D'Annunzio, forgetting that his lavish prodigality was enhancing the value of the house he occupied, went on transforming everything according to his whims, erecting gates and grilles in wrought iron, partitions in stone or wood; giving orders for planting new avenues, digging canals, buying trees, installing sanitation, electricity, telephones, central heating, and everything that might be wanted.

The Capponcina, for which no one would have given 25,000 lire when D'Annunzio chose it for his residence, was worth over 300,000 when he left it, and I am speaking only of the building itself.

On the Chalet Saint-Dominique, which was offered to him for

40,000 francs, D'Annunzio spent about 60,000, of which more than half went towards improving the property.

Apart from strictly private possessions, there was no single object or piece of furniture belonging to the former installation which figured at Saint-Dominique. When D'Annunzio left Italy, to which he was to return only seven years later, he had with him only three trunks and three suit-cases containing his clothes, his dressing-case, and the *Rhymes* of Petrarch.

The Chalet Saint-Dominique consisted of a ground floor and two storeys. On the ground floor there was a sort of hall transformed by D'Annunzio into a supplementary library, opening into a large drawing-room, from which one passed to a small dining-room.

On the first floor was a small *salon*—a veritable kingdom of cushions—the library where the Poet worked, and a corridor leading to his bedroom No. 1 and to his dressing-room.

On the second floor were his bedroom No. 2, with its attendant dressing-room, and two or three rooms full of wardrobes.

The mystery of D'Annunzio's duplicated bedroom, which might intrigue the reader, deserves an explanation, the more so as, unless materially impossible, this institution formed part of his normal habits.

I must, however, warn the reader that the explanation of this mania, given by D'Annunzio to those brave enough to demand it, was, properly speaking, only an explanation "*ad usum Delphini*" and that only a very innocent dauphin would have accepted it—a dauphin past the age of fourteen would have been unlikely to attach credence to it.

D'Annunzio used to affirm to his visitors most seriously that sometimes he felt the need for hiding even from his domestics; that he wished his nights to last as long as it suited him, etc., and that this was the reason why it pleased him to possess a supplementary bedroom, entrance to which was forbidden to his household, and where no one was allowed to disturb him under any pretext whatsoever.

The room, in fact, enjoyed, like an embassy, the privilege of extra-territoriality, and, in truth, there was a certain duplicity, not unlike that prevailing in embassies, about its purpose, since it permitted meetings and affairs to be carried on in the secret

privacy of its shelter, for what visitor indeed would doubt the absence of the Ambassador after having been shown an empty library and an empty bedroom?

In the study of the *chalet* D'Annunzio wrote *Le Canzoni della Geste d'Oltremare*, the *Pisanella*, *Contemplazione della Morte*, *Chèvrefeuille*, *Leda senza Cigno*, *Parisina*, and almost all the *Faville del Maglio*. The *Saint-Sébastien* was almost entirely composed at Villa Charitas.

The library table, at which he worked, was surrounded by huge bookcases, more of which were to be found in all the other rooms, save the bedroom, and also panelling the wooden staircase, which led from the entrance hall to the first floor.

During his brief stay in Paris, D'Annunzio, in the course of his ramblings in bookshops, ordered books to be sent to him at Arcachon, and though in strict proportion to his needs, their number soon rose to over 5,000, most of which were bound at his orders. His French bindings, executed by the famous Gruel, bore gold lettering on cover and title-page.

He called this collection of his small French library the "*Bibliotecnica gallica*."

It occupied large and small walnut shelves and bore numerous inscriptions:

L'OUVRIER SE COGNOIST A L'OUVRAGE—LAISSEZ MOI PENSER A MON AYSE—TAIS TOY—LE TEMPS VENRA—ACCIOCHE' TU PIU COSE POSSA PIU' NE SOSTIENI—SE SIBI PROPE EST—LASSO CHE MAL ACCORTO FUI DA PRIMA—NON VEGGO OND'ESCA (COL LABIRINTO)—LEGE LEGE ET RELEGE—LABORA ORA ET INVENIES—DIVO BON-ARROTO SACRUM—ARDISCO NON ORDISCO—E PER NODO E PER FORZA—DOPPIO ARDOR MI CONSUMA—ARDENDO M'INALZO—LEGO PIEGANDOMI—IO HO QUEL CHE HO DONATO—PLUS HAULT—LE TEMPS ET MOI—

I hope that this minute enumeration of the mottoes in the library of the Poet will give satisfaction to all his admirers who often asked him for mottoes for their writing papers and their *ex-libris*, their enquiries, of course, remaining unanswered.

The atmosphere which reigned at the Chalet Saint-Dominique was easier to breathe, and perfumes and incense were used with

greater discretion than at the Capponcina. The heat was, therefore, much more bearable. D'Annunzio led there, for some time, a more hygienic and even an austere life.

When he was not working he rose as early as usual, read, meditated, and rode on the dunes, followed by his dogs. He came back for lunch, took coffee in the garden fronting the beach; afterwards he visited the dogs and horses, then shut himself in his study until six o'clock in the evening. At that time, even in the winter, no sooner had night fallen than he went out to take a walk alone with his favourite dogs. He came back for dinner, improvised on the harmonium or listened to music made by others. Towards ten-thirty he once more retired to his library.

At the *chalet* he led an existence similar to that at the Capponcina; though severe, it was never ascetic. With D'Annunzio, who modelled himself rather on his countryman Ovid than on Thomas More, a consistent state of grace remained a pious wish.

Anyhow, it never lasted over a fortnight, and on such occasions he showed himself so boastful of this record that I cannot help thinking that such an exception cannot have recurred more than twice in the course of his life.

He hardly saw anyone—perhaps some friend, every two months, but not more often than that.

When I watched him at Fiume, a few years later, receiving at times fifty people in succession on the same day, I was unable to trust my eyes, because for D'Annunzio receptions have always spelt torture. He looks upon them as a loss of time, perhaps a pleasant one, but always to be deplored, and only to be accepted with bad grace and under compulsion, principally when moved to do so by self-interested motives or mere courtesy, the latter contingency being the more frequent of the two.

During the periods in which he was immersed in his work he saw no one, and completely changed his mode of life. He got up at ten-thirty and took his lunch at one.

It often happened that I took my meals with him during these working periods. Respectful of his silence, I only opened my mouth to eat. From time to time it was he who, from some latent sense of duty, addressed some remark to me bearing

upon the vagaries of the weather or any matter that occurred to him.

I was so convinced that he only spoke with his lips while his thoughts were elsewhere that I did not even trouble to answer and allowed his questions to drop—a fact of which he never seemed to be aware. If the weather was fine he took coffee with me, still in silence, in the garden, and if it was raining, we retired to the glass veranda built on to the drawing-room. Then, at a predetermined moment he would rise and go into his library, from which he did not again emerge. From two to seven he worked there alone; he also partook of his dinner in solitude. After that, he went out for his usual walk, at times with a lantern, because he hated—so he said—“*to crush toads . . . which revenge themselves afterwards . . .*” came home and went on working until four in the morning.

D'Annunzio kept the Chalet Saint-Dominique from July 1910 until September 1916.

He would probably be in possession of it now—since with him temporary arrangements often turn into permanent ones—if the Villa had not been subdivided among some twenty heirs after the death of the old owner, Adolphe Bermond. After inevitable discussions which lasted several months, they began negotiations for its sale to Monsieur Phillipart, the recently elected Mayor of Bordeaux, at the same time inviting D'Annunzio to vacate the premises. The sudden and unforeseen decision of the Bermond heirs came as a painful surprise to D'Annunzio. He was in Venice during one of his brief periods of rest from life at the Front, and he wrote to me in Paris enclosing a letter which he had received from Arcachon.

Here is that part of his letter which refers to the Villa at Moulleau:

“I have made many sacrifices to keep this refuge.

“In the hope of being able to return to it—for if I survive my war I am afraid that it will not suit me to make my home in this country, where the rabble is incorrigible—I had even left caretakers. I cannot express to you how sad I am when I think of all this.

“As a precaution I had left, in my will, all my possessions and my papers to the city of Arcachon or to the French Government, on the

supposition that, by some bizarre dispensation, those who had been my hosts for five years would respect the asylum which saw the inception of the Oration of Quarto.

"The Villa is sold; I do not know to whom. My lease expires at the end of May. I must move.

"In the actual conditions, with the offensive now imminent, I cannot possibly come to France, and yet I alone can undertake the removal, so dear to me are all the objects left in this old chalet and so intimate are the contents of my papers. What shall we do? We must at least obtain a short respite.

"Perhaps my friends in France will realise the odiousness of this procedure. I do not even appeal to their generosity. They wished to erect a lasting memorial to me on the confines of the Landes forest—but even this matters no longer.

"Perhaps Barrès or Barthou or Pichon can intervene officiously to allow me a respite in order to obtain the prolongation of my lease from the present owner, so that, later, when this tremendous epoch is a thing of the past, I may come to France and make all necessary arrangements.

"What is your advice? I have not yet approached anybody, fearing to blunder in this delicate affair, but with your usual tact, you might put out feelers and guide me accordingly.

"I have no doubt that an immediate removal would be disastrous.

"As I am prevented from keeping this refuge (how many thousands of lire thrown away needlessly on the oyster-bed alone in three years!) I would at least obtain some facilities in order to ensure the transport of my goods and chattels.

"I had left everything to France in case of my dying gloriously on the battlefield: may I be given time to die well!

"Venice, 27th April, 1918."

But the sons of that Adolphe Bermond to whom the Poet had dedicated the most beautiful pages of *Contemplazione della Morte* remained unmoved by the letters which I sent them in D'Annunzio's name.

They calmly proceeded with the sale of the Villa to Monsieur Phillipart.

Fortunately, this gentleman of Gascony was not only a cultured and courteous man but, in addition, a great admirer of

the Poet. He realised at once how ungracious an act it would be to eject without notice a tenant of D'Annunzio's standing, and so sent him the following letter:

"Illustrious and honoured *Maitre*,

"I acquired the Villa Saint-Dominique when it was put up for sale, and I had reasons to believe that you had lost interest in the Moulleau.

"I hear from various sources that you are sorrowful at the thought that, some day, you will have to leave this calm retreat which contains your treasures and your memories.

"In gratitude for the delightful hours which I owe to your books, especially *L'Enfant de Volupté*, and as a mark of gratitude for the eminent services you have rendered to France and to humanity, I offer to give up my rights to you. The title deeds are signed by the heirs of Bermond: my signature alone is lacking.

"Your name, if you like, shall replace mine.

"I beg to inform you that the price upon which we are agreed is 160,000 francs, all expenses to be borne by the buyer.

"If I were as rich as they are in America, this last sentence would not figure in my letter and this deed would already bear your twice glorious name.

"Excuse me and sympathise with me for only being able to offer you to take my place. I salute you with admiration and respect.

"A. PHILLIPART."

D'Annunzio answered it in the following terms:

"Venice, 9th June, 1919.

"Dear Sir,

"I thank you for your great courtesy and long-suffering patience, and I beg you to forgive my involuntary delay in communicating with you.

"You know, perhaps, that I have been fighting ceaselessly on what was called the 'single front.' I hope that this secures for me your indulgence as an ally.

"Monsieur Antongini will come to Bordeaux to place himself at your disposal and to find, with you, the best and quickest means to settle the matter of the chalet.

"I am leaving, as you know, with great regret this peaceful old

house, where I have worked and meditated so much. It was there that I wrote all my French works and also the Quarto Speech which gave Italy the signal to enter the fray.

"It was there that I spent my years of sadness and expectation. The beauty of the countryside and the kindness of the inhabitants sweetened my exile.

"I cannot, in these hard times, buy the house. I thank you profoundly for your very cordial offer.

"I feel sure that we shall be able to settle all the questions between us with the same cordiality.

"Will you give a greeting from me to the lovely splintered pines and the golden gorse? The scent of them stays in my loyal memory. It is the very perfume of France, which I would fain preserve.

"Thank you, sir.

"Gabriele D'Annunzio."

It was thus that D'Annunzio left for ever the French Landes, the pine-woods, the ocean and the "placid house on the dunes." When, in 1919, he asked me to supervise the removal of everything he had accumulated during the years of his occupation of the Chalet Saint-Dominique and to send it on to Venice, I was obliged, in order to transport all these various articles, which weighed over 30 tons in the aggregate, to commission eight complete trucks for the purpose.

I owed this signal honour to the fact that the Poet was unavoidably prevented from dealing personally with this removal, since, in his new capacity of sovereign of a city and its territory, he could not abandon his new regal residence.

He conferred this trust upon me with a resigned and saddened air, which, for those who knew him intimately, meant: "I am convinced that, as I am unable to direct this work in person, the major part of all my possessions will be destroyed, lost, or at least damaged. But such is Fate and I must submit to it." A few months earlier he had already written on the same subject:

"Monsieur Phillipart—so the caretakers inform me—intends to take immediate possession of the Villa. Imagine my embarrassment with regard to the removal! You will have to throw everything into the basin of Arcachon. You will not forget, of course, the quantities

of books and the huge plaster casts . . . I had hoped to be allowed to keep this refuge."

To my honour be it said, the transport of the 30 tons of household goods was accompanied by two accidents only. The Farnese Hercules, unaccustomed to rail travel, temporarily lost his head, and a tiny carpet was stolen at the station at Arcachon.

For the benefit of history, I shall add that my responsibilities were made not less cumbersome by the fact that the self-styled friends of the Poet, no doubt in jest, had filled his head with the idea that the easiest and quickest way to send his treasures from Arcachon to Venice was by sea—that is, to allow a sailing vessel lying in the bay of Arcachon to take the whole lot on board and then to hug the coasts of Portugal and Spain, pass the Straits, and then cross the Mediterranean and, finally, the Adriatic.

This project, which would certainly have been adopted by Fernando Cortez or Vasco da Gama, had they suddenly decided to transport their Penates from Spain to the new world conquered by them, was dropped merely because I took it upon myself to guarantee the transport by railway as the only reasonable method to prevent delay and damage—a responsibility which, to this day when I recall it, sends a shiver down my spine.

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Of the famous Casetta Rossa on the Canale Grande of Venice I have already spoken, and I believe that the Poet's brief description of it written some years before he thought of living there, and already quoted, releases me from the need of dwelling on it any further.

It was rented from Prince Hohenlohe, and was the smallest house D'Annunzio had ever inhabited. It looked more like a Venetian jewel or a casket of the eighteenth century than like a real house; it consisted of an ornate drawing-room, "brave with mirrors and adorned with garlands" flaunting a collection of Venetian bags of the period, of fans and majolicas, of a dining-room suitable at most for an intimate supper-party of the sort patronised by the Chevalier de Seingalt, and of two bedrooms.

This was the only time that D'Annunzio did not add so much

as a pin to the decoration and furniture already in existence. He merely contributed to its adornment by keeping the house constantly filled with flowers.

There is little to say, and that little I have already said elsewhere, of the old house in rue Geoffroy L'Asnier in Paris, the House of the Thousand Buddhas.

I may add that D'Annunzio's life in that abode, specially suited to the needs of a French bachelor under Louis XVI, apart from the inevitable feminine adventures, was mostly meditative.

Even the adventures were so discreetly and almost stealthily conducted that they provoked a wholly unexpected protest on the part of a tenant of the second floor of the house (D'Annunzio only occupied the ground floor and the garden)—a complaint unique on the part of fellow-lodgers.

It came from an eccentric spinster, who never left the house, and had lived there for many years in complete isolation, in the company of an old dog and of a servant, an octogenarian like herself.

Hearing that the new tenant was the great Italian poet, about whom the strangest and most licentious legends circulated in Paris, and exhilarated by such rumours, she cherished the dream of gladdening the sunset of her years by becoming a witness to scenes of revelry and licentiousness.

The porter of the house, who was a crafty old school-master given to gossip, told me one day that the old lady spent whole days behind her blinds, casting curious glances into the garden and listening to the slightest noise.

But the sad and damp garden remained always deserted, and nothing interesting could ever be gleaned in its precincts. . . . One day the old lady could no longer contain herself, and unburdened herself to the porter. "I ask myself," she said, "whether it is worth while to have as a tenant a D'Annunzio, moreover a poet and an Italian! He lives like a monk! And I had dreamed that I would behold orgies!"

* * * *

I have also mentioned the little house of Cervignano where he used to stay during the war.

There, through an irony of fate, D'Annunzio acted as host to an Austrian family, composed of father, mother and two sons.

The father was an ardent ornithologist, and in view of this it was not to be wondered at that the house was decorated with a multitude of stuffed aquatic birds, which were not greatly to D'Annunzio's liking.

As it would have been difficult to ask them to be removed, in view of their large numbers, D'Annunzio bought eighteen large screens over six feet high, and disposed them so as to hide this defunct and feathered little world, which, with all respect, reminded him of the Church of the Capuchins at Palermo. Through a cleverly contrived arrangement of the screens, the birds disappeared from his sight, but, conversely, he was only able to reach his bed by a variety of devious paths and through a sort of labyrinth. Once, however, he had reached the couch he received his just recompense, for it was covered with forty cushions of red damask, which gave it a truly D'Annunzian atmosphere.

During the days following Caporetto the cushions were commandeered by an Austrian sub-lieutenant, Müller by name, who some time later sent them to Trieste as souvenirs and relics. After the war, when D'Annunzio was at Fiume, Lieutenant Müller wrote to the Poet asking him if he would welcome their return. Whilst thanking him, D'Annunzio did not ask for restitution.

"Can you imagine," he said to me, *"the effect that would be produced at Fiume by the arrival of a truck with forty red cushions? Goodness knows what the American newspapers would say!"*

We now arrive at the wonderful story of the Seraglio.

This belonged to the Senator, Giovanni Battista Bianchi, a manufacturer from Garda who owned, on the shore of the lake (the Seraglio was built with its back to the mountain), another spacious villa, which I believe he still inhabits to-day.

The Senator had owned it for nearly thirty years, but the villa had originally belonged to the Gonzagas, suzerains of Mantova, who had linked it up by a subterranean passage which exists no longer, with their castle at Maderno.

It appears that the villa, or at least the house, which occupied the present site was used by a joyful offspring of the illustrious

princely family as a sort of menagerie, but instead of serving as a menagerie for wild beasts, it was turned into a harem for beautiful women: hence its new name.

Such a legend was calculated to please D'Annunzio, and it seemed actually created to render the villa agreeable to him. There is no doubt that he was the right man to carry on the traditions of the Gonzaga family.

When Senator Bianchi heard that the German owners of the Villa Cargnacco, where the Poet was already in residence, were raising difficulties concerning the acquisition of the villa, he enquired from him, through me, whether he would like the Seraglio as a gift.

The offer was accepted, on the sole condition, imposed by Senator Bianchi, that, after D'Annunzio's death, the villa should become a museum of Fiume trophies.

The Seraglio possessed a magnificent garden, rich in flowers and even richer in orchards, and D'Annunzio, once he had assumed ownership, used to visit them almost daily.

He studied the improvements with which it was his intention to embellish the house, sometimes remaining for hours in the gardens, busy with plans and projects, taking measurements, consulting with the engineers . . . and afterwards returning to Cargnacco, his car filled with bunches of roses and baskets of fruit. To the friends who came to visit him at Cargnacco, he spoke of his intentions regarding his new property as though their execution were imminent.

"But, apart from Cargnacco, there is also the Seraglio," wrote Boulanger after having visited D'Annunzio in 1921. "It is a large and beautiful property which overlooks the countryside of Maderno and the sparkling lake adjoining Gardone. An admirer has presented it to the Poet, and he intends to erect the mausoleum of the Fiume Legionaries in the very best style on its site.

"I should like to add that he proposes to cultivate his land, to produce honey and fruit, to raise cattle, and to organise a veritable agricultural industry. . . . We shall have there the D'Annunzian firm which will provide its clients with flowers and animals, poetry and wine, speeches, flax, advice on politics, novels and perfumes, vegetables and Latin mottoes . . ."

* * * * *

Unexpectedly, one day the Poet stopped his visits to the Seraglio. From the laborious negotiations which at last resulted in the acquisition of the old house at Cargnacco, there finally emerged the Vittoriale.

This was not the only reason for abandoning the Seraglio. There was another one much more important for the study of the D'Annunzian mentality which did not escape these eyes of mine, which D'Annunzio called, in one of his dedications, "acute and attentive," nor my ears, which have always been so good; but I am afraid that I cannot reveal it at present.

The Seraglio, with a letter from D'Annunzio expressing the most lofty sentiments, was accordingly returned to the generous donor.

CHAPTER IX

D'ANNUNZIO'S ANIMAL COMPANIONS

"A viper will kill you!"—His greyhounds—The gentle Crissa—Saint-Cloud races and His Grace the Duke of Leeds—*Lives of Illustrious Dogs*—The kennels of Saint-Liévre—White Havana's victories—A dog's tragedy—The miracle of Cécile Sorel—Ali Nour, supple pride of the desert—Proud Malatesta—Two horses lost at Monte Carlo—A thoroughbred for 275 francs—Fiumanin, the eunuch of the Seraglio—A Messalina with a hundred lovers—The philosopher Evandro—Li Tai Pé, the telepathic fish—A tortoise that emulated Madame Rubinstein—The Sphinx.

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO loves animals. The principal reasons for this feeling are, in the first place, his natural kindness, which places him in close sympathy with all natural creatures; in the second, a feeling of well-being and of peace and tranquillity, which the proximity of living beings awakens in him, for he has no occasion to distrust their attachment, which cannot be suspected of any interested motives.

I do not venture to assert that his "Franciscan" love for the animals of creation goes so far as to include the cumbersome company of "Brother Lion" and the more dangerous one of "Sister Viper." Regarding the latter, for some unknown reason he wrote: *"The demon has said, 'A viper will kill you,'"* but his temperament would certainly allow him to adapt himself much more easily to an existence among wild animals than to one among vulgar and uncultured human beings.

We must also take into account another element which explains and amplifies, from a certain point of view, the Poet's instinctive sympathy towards animals.

He is one of the most inquisitive individuals I have ever met. His curiosity is always active and vigilant, and it is never dissociated from a certain natural diffidence, which forms the invariable basis of his human relationships.

D'Annunzio is the most controversial and ruthless student of social conditions and an observer of exquisite sensibility. "Of

all my faculties," he wrote, "the one which I most assiduously sharpen and stimulate is that of observation."

Fortunately for those who have lived with him and for those who have been transiently admitted to his presence, his faculty of acute perception is combined with an inexhaustible fund of comprehension and indulgence towards all the frailties, vices and physical and moral blemishes of his fellow-men.

Nothing affords D'Annunzio greater delight than to guess a man's secret thoughts by the expression on his face, or to discover beneath the most artful make-up a wrinkle on the face of a woman, or to probe the foibles of a fellow-creature. Where the majority remain blind he alone sees, verifies and passes judgment. He shows himself forgiving with regard to moral shortcomings, at times even managing to forget them, but nothing ever escapes his vigilant glance.

Only stupid or conceited people are able to face him without qualms. All the others experience, in his presence, the uncomfortable sensation of one who knows that each of his gestures is being spied upon through a keyhole.

Naturally, the curiosity of the Poet with regard to animals of all species is stimulated by the amusement provided by their antics or the compassion derived from their sufferings.

Thus it often happens that he can spend hours interestedly watching a bitch suckling her young, delicately bandage with his own hands the injured paw of a dog, or witness, helpless and sorrowful, the death-pangs of some faithful steed which has shared with him the joys of the chase and the risks of the hunt. Nevertheless, he never allowed a dog to lick his hand or his face. He used to assert very seriously that *"the hypocritical muzzle of a dog is extremely dangerous and contains thousands of microbes in ambush: Tiberius perished in this fashion."*

How can we ever forget the admirable pages of the *Contemplazione della Morte*, where he describes the anguish of a bitch trying to suckle her nine small puppies all at once?

"There were nine of them, and so as not to exhaust the mother, it became necessary to make the cruel decision to sacrifice those who were weaker or less beautiful than the others. I had tried everywhere, but was unable to find a foster-mother. I went into the kennel, my heart wrung with almost feminine pity. The greyhound,

lying on its flank, with muzzle hidden between crossed paws, had the grace of the swan hiding its bill under its wing . . .

" . . . Five of her puppies were sucking with an already pugnacious vigour, kneading the maternal belly with their small paws, in order to squeeze out the swelling teats, at times nozzling their heads the better to achieve their purpose: a joyful shiver ran across their spines to the tips of their ridiculous tails to render even more acute their gluttonous delight.

" . . . The other four, satiated, slept on their backs like babies, showing their pink bellies, where the navel was scarcely closed, the soles of the feet, transparent and tender as newly uncurled leaves which seemed made of wax and down. From time to time they jerked and whined as though they were already dreaming. One of them continuously pawed the air, its soft nose modelled in the shape of a blunt percussion cap. Its tongue curled like the carmine petal of a flower, its throat throbbed as though milk were flowing through it.

"The first flowering of animal life never seemed more miraculous to me."

The Poet always shows himself a wonderful master, both to his animals and to his servants, and the latter will, I am sure, forgive me a comparison that is solely inspired by D'Annunzio's kindness. If, at times, he is severe and exacting towards them, he also possesses the art of rewarding them with the utmost generosity, and no one has ever had cause to regret having been in the Poet's service.

I am unable to determine to what degree D'Annunzio actually interests himself in the life and habits of inferior animals. True, in his library the complete works of Fabre stand side by side with those of Michelet, and, on one occasion, he took a peculiar liking to a small goldfish. I can also remember a curious wading-bird which was his faithful and silent companion when he was on leave during the war.

There was also an eagle, in whose fortunes he took such an interest that for many years he paid for its maintenance in a zoological garden.

In Venice he often enjoyed playing with a green lizard, and this struck the painter Sibellato to such an extent that he painted him in that attitude. He wrote: *"The mystery of a green day whose flash was a firefly."* The blind devotion of a magnificent and

voracious tortoise afforded him great diversion during the first months of his sojourn on the Lago di Garda. But these were isolated episodes, and though I shall give further details about them as I proceed with my story, the reader will find that D'Annunzio's preference has always been for superior animals, especially horses and dogs.

D'Annunzio's dogs! Who has not heard of them?

Their names and their actions, linked up with those of more delicate and more illustrious creatures, have been in evidence during the whole of the Poet's life. How many has he possessed? How and where have they come to grief? Which have been his favourites?

Before answering these questions I must make a short digression.

Although D'Annunzio has a great affection for all animals, and for dogs in particular, and is therefore absolutely incapable of hurting a single hair of the most miserable and vulgar mongrel, he has a definite predilection for the nobler, if not the more intelligent, of the canine race.

The adjective "noble" must in the present case be taken in its wider meaning: the pride of pedigree, the beauty of æsthetic lines, the distinction of courage.

If we except the dogs which comprise the "life-saving" kind (St. Bernard and Newfoundland), the Danish and police dogs, and perhaps the Boreal breeds—that is, dogs that combine the qualities which I have named above—there remain only the greyhounds, the foxhounds, and, if we go further afield, the fox-terriers.

Considering that D'Annunzio has never been prominent as a huntsman, it is curious that he prefers the greyhound—the "long-muzzles," as he likes to call them.

It was to a greyhound that fell the honour of being immortalised by the Poet, not with his pen or pencil, but in an etching, the only one ever produced by D'Annunzio. The subject of the etching was inspired by the following lines: "*Donna Clara in my thoughts—On the damask bed ample and deep,—nudity resplendent in the shadows, and the fair head smiles on the pillow—Erect on its slender paws—the greyhound caresses the divine foot of the Atalanta—and at this caress there trembles from head to foot*"

that nude form, with a queer pleasure——" A copy of this rare etching can be found at the Museum of Bayonne, presented by Georges Herelle, who translated at the time the works of D'Annunzio.

It represents a naked woman, half draped in some material ornamented with the signs of the Zodiac. At her feet lies a large greyhound.

"The greyhounds" (he wrote during his earliest youth) *"are the noblest among all dogs. Not theirs is the vulgar habit of faithfulness to their master, that vile habit which with the poor in spirit passes as a virtue.*

"They would certainly not permit themselves to die of hunger, as those depicted on the tomb of Edward III. They are free, strong, independent, pugnacious, brave, clamorous: they possess the grace of serpents and the awesomeness of felines.

"In Araby it sometimes happened that the greyhound succumbed to the wooing of some dog of another race: its master howled with anguish and shame. The imprudent one was killed instantaneously, so that it might not bring forth plebeian offspring.

"Such is the greyhound, my sweet ladies, and if this panegyric has not wearied you, let us proceed a little longer with the catalogue of virtues of these, our noble and favourite animals.

"Oh, beautiful ladies of Rome, protect the greyhound! Put forth your endeavours that honour should here also be rendered to these great dogs with coats polished like silk, slim and slender, with their sensitive legs, their velvety muzzles, their rosy bellies, their palpitating flanks, ardent as you, audacious as you, unfaithful as you."

Therefore when we talk about D'Annunzio's dogs we are, in the majority of cases, referring to greyhounds. One of the first dogs owned by D'Annunzio during his Roman period was a greyhound named Max XV. With regard to this favourite dog there still exists an interesting letter directed by the Poet to his old friend, Micco Spadaro, which immortalises its memory in a fashion more endurable than any epitaph.

"My dear Micco, allow me to alleviate your nightly labour by recounting to you the massacre of yesterday, thus giving you material wherewith to fill your damnable column.

"You know Max XV: he is indubitably one of the strongest, the most voluptuous dogs who ever flaunted his tail like a pennant.

Max, as you know, is very humble and extremely good-natured; he inclines his pretty head under the caress of childish hands; he hates—a quite natural trait—the dogs of his own breed: they are made to feel the strength of his white fangs, and his inferiors cower under the disdain expressed in his glance.

"Yesterday, towards nine o'clock, I committed the utter carelessness of sending a waiter in the café to take him for his usual airing, from fountain to fountain. Max was perfectly docile until he noticed the approach of a setter; then, with one of his indomitable impulses, he broke his chain and launched himself at the enemy, who fell on him, I hear, like forked lightning. Inspired by this first assault, he went merrily forward; another dog joined the fray, and was hurled across the pavement like a limp rag. People came running, armed with sticks and umbrellas, but the blows only infuriated the struggling combatants without any result, until I arrived on the spot, having been informed of the battle.

"If you had seen, my friend, with what marvellous agility Max answered my call, panting like a youthful beast of prey and steeped in the odour of victory!

"I was surrounded by a rush of infuriated people: a hundred imaginary masters of dogs, a hundred supposedly bitten dogs clamoured around me. I went to the police station with Max at my side, followed by a crowd, bespattered with the sudden freshness of a drizzle. There I believe I was made to sign some admission of guilt, and after that conducted under escort to pay a fine.

"Max, I think, laughed in his sleeve! Because of Max's incontrovertible valour, I wish to give the lie to those who would call the lovely fighting dog of yesterday a Maltese Mongrel.

"I thank you, Gabriele."

There can always be found at the Poet's side, whether of Russian, Arabic, Tartar, Persian or Scotch breed, the slender muzzles of racing dogs who are stretched out in a heraldic pose on his carpets, familiarly curled up at his feet, or galloping behind him when he is out riding.

This particular canine breed can boast that at least one of its representatives has always been attached to the Poet's person.

Innumerable formerly in Italy and in the farm "Dame Rose" in France, likewise numerous at the Chalet Saint-Dominique, but reduced at Fiume to a single specimen, the sweet-tempered

Crissa, they have shared in the glory of their master and have been part and parcel of his adventures and career.

The pages which the Poet consecrated in his novel *Il Fuoco* to his playfellows of the Capponcina impose upon me the duty of quoting the words in which he rendered them tribute, without omitting a single one.

The following may be found in *The Flame of Life* (Heinemann):

"Ali-Nour! Crissa! Nerissa! Clarissa! Altair! Helion! Hardican te! Veronese! Hierro!"

* *"He knew them all by name; and when he called them, they seemed to recognise him for their master. There was the Scotch deer-hound, the native of the Highlands, with rough thick coat, rougher and thicker round his jowls and nose, and grey as new iron; there was the reddish Irish wolf-hound, the robust destroyer of wolves, whose brown eyes showed the whites on moving; there was the spotted Tartary hound, black and yellow, brought from the vast Asiatic steppes where he guarded the tents at night from leopards and hyenas; there was the Persian dog, fair and small, his ears covered with long silky hairs, with a bushy tail, his coat paler along the ribs and down his legs, more graceful even than the antelopes he had slain; there was the Spanish galgo who had migrated with the Moors, the magnificent beast held in leash by a pompous dwarf in the picture of Diego Velasquez, trained to course and overthrow in the naked plains of the Mancha, or in the low woods thick with brushwood of Murcia and Alicante; there was the Arabian sloughi, the illustrious plunderer of the desert, with dark tongue and palate, all his sinews visible, his framework of bones showing through the fine skin, a noble animal, all pride, courage and elegance, accustomed to sleeping on rich carpets and drinking pure milk in pure vessels. And gathered together in a pack, they quivered round him who knew how to reawaken in their torpid blood their primitive instincts of pursuit and carnage."*

Among the dogs that belonged to the Florentine period, one was omitted in the above pages, because he died before the Poet wrote them, and his sad destiny gave D'Annunzio occasion to show how much he liked animals, especially dogs. It was a ten-months-old puppy, by name Magog. He was one day found

* This is the *only* passage taken from an alien translation—"The Flame of Life" (Heinemann), translated by Cassandra Vivaria.

strangled in a ditch near the Villa Capponcina, and the Poet, who was convinced that the murderer was a farmer who lived in the neighbourhood and detested dogs, lodged a complaint against him.

This time—an unheard-of occurrence—D'Annunzio presented himself at the trial. Let us listen to him as did the magistrate on that day:

"The dog had a name," began D'Annunzio, "which may seem barbaric: Magog. But he was a vivacious and affectionate creature, and I am greatly gratified at the honour rendered to his memory. It is a very simple story, though characterised by extreme cruelty.

"He was a young and healthy dog, a greyhound of excellent pedigree, some ten months old, a friend of all and sundry, his only fault that he was inclined to do a little too much tail-wagging at anybody who came along. One morning of last June he was found in a ditch, his skull not only broken but smashed by the blows of a cudgel. Do not believe that I am led astray by my superlative love for dogs if I consider this murder as a villainy and an act of brutality which deserves to be punished . . ."

" . . . In conclusion, this killing has no justification in my eyes. The dog was extremely gentle—so much so, in fact, that I had presented him to a little boy, the son of my dear friend, the poet Adolfo de Bossis, and on the following day I was to leave for Rome.

"I believe that any person of even moderate kindness of heart will agree with me as to the justice of meting out the punishment due to the author of this cruelty. He was the meekest of dogs. Probably he first licked the hand of the man who killed him."

In answer to the question put by the magistrate whether Magog could have been indicted on the count of vagabondage, with the intent of stealing a fowl, D'Annunzio replied philosophically: *"I do not think so, because my other neighbours indulge in a little gentle speculation: whenever a hen is found dead anywhere in my vicinity (and the death, of course, is invariably attributed to my dogs) I pay four lire more than they would get for it in the market. The best proof of my assertion lies in the well-known fact that I am obliged to eat chickens nearly every day of my life."*

The lawsuit finished with the condemnation of the murderer to ten days' detention and 50 lire in fines.

The small victim became as famous, at least in the local newspapers, as the dog of Pericles.

Following upon the ignoble sale of the habitation in which the Poet had patiently collected so many lovely things and written so many masterpieces, the greyhounds and a poor little spaniel called Teliteli shared the fate of the pouter-pigeons and the amorous little doves whose sweet cooing filled with languor the kitchen-garden of the Capponcina. D'Annunzio's art treasures, furniture, carpets, china, jewels and personal belongings were scattered in all directions. It must be remarked that the books alone escaped this idiotic and irreverent pillage, to which I shall revert later on, if only for the joy of branding those Pharisees who, from near and from afar, celebrated this auction as a victory, and who thought that they were witnessing the burial of a glory which, however, rose from the ashes like the Phoenix, revived and resplendent, after every new attempt at destruction.

* * * * *

The pack of hounds, in part destroyed, in part dispersed, was reconstituted during the voluntary exile of D'Annunzio in France. At Arcachon, in the Villa Saint-Dominique, he constructed some magnificent kennels in his garden and embellished the entrance with four wooden pillars supported by roughly sculptured hares, which have now found a place in the garden of the Vittoriale and have given their name to the famous "Bridge of the Hares."

As usual, he bred greyhounds partly of Russian, partly of Scotch breed. The regulations of the kennels were extremely severe. With his habitual love for them and meticulousness for their comfort, D'Annunzio attended to all the details concerning the care, nutrition and suckling of the puppies. A time-table composed by him, and written in French in his own hand, allotted fixed hours for feeding the young animals.

- 7 a.m. Bowl of milk.
- 11 a.m. Gog, Magog, Undulne, suckling. Afterwards another bowl of milk to all six.
- 3 p.m. Bowl of milk.
- 7 p.m. Timbra, Altaor, Pisanella, suckling. Afterwards bowl of milk to all six.
- 10 p.m. Bowl of milk, the mother to suckle all her young.

At Arcachon D'Annunzio spent hours on end amongst his favourite dogs. Of this, Jean Le Bousquière wrote as follows: "He watched over their games, took a passionate interest in their rivalries and stimulated the impetus of their coursing by urging them forward with shouts and gestures, delighting in their pranks like the boy and hero he was at heart."

And Paul Fort, in the *Petite Gironde*, after a visit to the exiled Poet, described him in the following manner: "In the midst of his pack, D'Annunzio holds his perfect and nervous greyhounds on a leash. They look like white wraiths rising and falling: they bound tenderly towards their master, but a gesture from him is sufficient to calm them and discipline them into following him, pressed against each other like a flock behind the shepherd."

Assuredly he repaid their love in full. One day, while still at Arcachon, D'Annunzio was unable to find his small fox-terrier "Petrucha," who was the companion of his greyhounds. Although he was not a dog of special pedigree—in fact, not much more than a cross-breed—D'Annunzio spared no effort, and allowed me to spare none, in order to find him. He wrote to me at the hotel: "*. . . The other evening, towards 10 o'clock, Petrucha, the small fox-terrier, disappeared. We imagined that he had gone to another villa, but there was no sign of him. The search continued yesterday, and we made enquiries about him at the Mairie of Teste and at that of Arcachon. Probably the dog has been stolen. I cannot imagine why, but this morning I have been thinking about that Russian vagabond. You should try to see him and tell him that the little white, long-haired 'fox' has been lost and that I will give him 50 lire if he succeeds in finding him for me.*"

Later on those kennels, the pride of D'Annunzio, were fated to be transformed into regular greyhound racing kennels, established between 1913 and 1914 in the farm called "Dame Rose," at the gates of Paris. Several of its inmates distinguished themselves in the famous dog-races in the meadows of Saint-Cloud. Only half a dozen Russian Borzois were left in the old kennels at Arcachon: D'Annunzio had a special predilection for them, but called them jokingly "*chiens de cocotte*."

At the beginning of 1914 it was thanks to D'Annunzio and other trainers and amateurs of greyhound racing, such as

Madame Lillas, the Countess of Goloubeff, Madame Hubin, Marcel Boulenger, that coursing knew moments of splendour. It was at that time that D'Annunzio won the Prix de Berri with his greyhound "White Havana," thus becoming the envy of all other trainers. The meetings nearly always took place at Saint-Cloud, on the grassy tracks of the racecourse of that name. Championships and other important awards were disputed on it: the competitors were numerous and exclusive, and the public, composed of owners, amateurs and neophytes, followed the racing, some with genuine interest, others simply from snobbishness, feeling in their hearts a good deal of sympathy for the hares, who offset their lack of courage and ability by prodigious buoyancy and cunning.

It was during the first months of 1914, a year which began in a deceptively tranquil fashion, that D'Annunzio displayed the most passionate interest in greyhounds and horse-racing. One of the most authoritative members of the "Greyhound Club de France," he had also become a friend of the Duke of Leeds, a noted trainer, who invited him to England to be present at the famous Waterloo Stakes, run every year near Liverpool on the course at Altcar, which is considered the "Derby" of greyhound racing. D'Annunzio went there with a French party who were ardently devoted to this sport. The competition (three days of delirious betting and exciting ups and downs for the owners) took place in the open, regardless of the weather.

Not only was the pace fast and furious, but fumes of champagne, whisky and cocktails rose in the air. The bookmakers were besieged by an excited crowd of dog-lovers.

D'Annunzio, who on that occasion found himself extremely popular with the English sporting community, deeply regretted that the dogs which he had in France were not eligible to compete for the Waterloo Cup. He unburdened himself to a woman reporter of the *Daily Mail* who came to interview him. *"I cannot enter my greyhounds because your barbarous laws forbid foreign dogs to come into the country, but I have bought an English greyhound from Colonel Leigh, of Warrington. I shall run him next year. His name is 'High-leg Panther,' and I shall describe him in the Life of Illustrious Dogs which I am writing.*

"All my own life has had something in common with that of

dogs. My conception of them is that of beneficent genii. They have the same sense of the supernatural, which can sometimes be detected in their sudden agitation. I have lived so much with them that I almost understand their thoughts and they almost speak to me."

Coursing has now also become the rage in Italy, but instead of real hares, the cinedrome of the Rondinella brought into use the prosaic electric hares, which soon earned D'Annunzio's sovereign contempt. He would not even allow them to be mentioned in his presence, and calls them "*an ignoble parody of real coursing.*"

At the time of the races of Saint-Cloud he took up this sport with such enthusiasm that he decided to write the book before mentioned, and allowed it to be generally believed that he was about to place the manuscript in the hands of the Parisian publisher, Calmann Lévy. This volume, dedicated to the glory of dogs, was, however, even less fortunate than its companion, which had preceded it by a few years, *Vite di Uomini Illustri ed Oscuri* (*Lives of Illustrious and Obscure Men*), contemporaneous with the admirable *Vita da Cola di Rienzo*, which I had later the honour of publishing myself.

The first-named was, on the contrary, destined to remain in an embryonic state, in spite of having given rise, as soon as its publication was declared imminent, to a both unforeseen and comical episode.

No sooner had the title been made public than swarms of elderly gentlemen and honest and venerable ladies, owners of ridiculous basset-terriers, of poodles adorned with pink ribbons, of whippets with mackintosh coats and little handkerchief pockets, inundated D'Annunzio with long epistles enumerating with pride the exceptional tokens of intelligence and devotion given by their Toto, Poupette, Bibi, Azor, Mimi, Kitty, etc., promising, in perfect good faith, to supply the author of the future book with documents of the most consummate interest.

In order to put a stop to this deluge of sentimentality, D'Annunzio ordered me to write the following letter to the *Gil Blas*:

"I am authorised to declare that the *Lives of Illustrious Dogs* will not be a series of canine biographies, as the fine article

which has appeared in the *Temps*, signed by Georges Docquois, might allow us to infer.

"Signor D'Annunzio is very much surprised that the intention of committing such a stupidity should have been foisted upon him. It is one worthy only of an aspirant to the post of watchman of that Parisian cemetery where so many old maids drop their flowers and their tears on the tombs of their small and rough-haired heroes. What he admires in his dogs is neither fidelity nor obedience, but their grace, their strength, and, above all, their indomitable courage. His book, therefore, will merely be the journal of his kennels, containing his personal daily notes on his doughty hounds.

"He hopes that this declaration will at least protect him against the avalanche of sentimental anecdotes which continue to pour in from drivelling admirers of old poodles and from 'receivers' of stray mongrels."

This letter had an almost immediate effect, and thenceforward he received only foreign letters, from writers who were out of touch with French news.

But with regard to D'Annunzian letters on the subject of dogs, a certain document relative to the feeding of his famous racing greyhounds was to be of far more importance to him.

The expenditure for the latter (in spite of the exhortations and fatherly advice of His Grace the Duke of Leeds, who could not believe his noble ears when the Poet assured him that every dog cost him, on an average, fifty francs a day) represented in the budget of their master a total monthly expenditure which, notwithstanding his noble stoicism in the face of financial difficulties, succeeded in perturbing even the mind of D'Annunzio. It must be noted that while expenses were thus piling up the Poet had, by agreement with Hertz and Coquelin, the managers of the Theatre of the Porte Saint-Martin, broken off the run of *Le Chèvrefeuille*, his tragedy in three acts.

His letter addressed to the two managers, did not so much concern itself with Art as with the subject of his greyhounds and the means of paying for their prime cutlets and the old Cognac on which those unconscious epicures daily fed and thrived with the utmost enjoyment.

Here is the letter, which I give in full, although the beginning

refers to the fiasco of the *Chèvrefeuille*, a fact wittily admitted by the author, an example of honesty unique in the annals of the theatre:

"My dear Managers,—

"It looks as though this mysterious *Chèvrefeuille* were a very poor investment: the box returns are meagre and your theatre is so huge! I am informed that, with a fine and generous gesture, you are proposing to keep the play running, at least until the revival of the *Gioconda*, with the intention, perhaps, of rewarding the poet in kind—that is, of paying for the figures evolved by his imagination with their equivalent in solid gold. I beg of you to give up this project, for already, even before the dress rehearsal, everybody was aware that the famous nose of 'Cyrano' could be seen sprouting under the mask of that excellent murderer *Pierre Dagon*, interpreted with such whole-hearted abnegation by *Monsieur Le Bargy*! The illustrious actor was to have gone to *Monte Carlo* on *St. Stephen's Day*, the 26th of next month. Instead of this, he will interpret the same important part on the same evening in *Paris*. That is all.

"We must respect the dictum of *Fate*, especially with regard to a tragedy like this, burdened with more or less recent fatalities.

"Forced as I am to provide the good red meat which nourishes and sustains the courage of my noble dogs, I am putting the last touches to a *Græco-Roman-Punic* tragedy for the cinema, in the style of *Quo Vadis*? Yards and yards of silent and highly adventurous film. You shall see.

"I once more thank my interpreters, who were wholly admirable, and beg you, my dear Managers, to believe in my most heartfelt gratitude.

"*The Kennels of Villacoublay*, 22nd December.

"*Gabriele D'Annunzio.*"

As was to be expected, this letter provoked a courteous protest on the part of Signor Pastrone, owner of *Cabiria* (the *Græco-Roman-Punic* tragedy), who considered the confession of the author rather damaging to the success of the film. However, as a business man, he ended by adopting D'Annunzio's opinion that, whatever allusion to *Cabiria* was made public, it could only further its chances; which, by the way, was perfectly correct.

The amalgamation of the Kennels of Villacoublay under the name of "Comte de Saint-Lièvre" with those of Madame Goloubeff was one of the important surprises of the spring of 1914. D'Annunzio spent his afternoons at the farm of Dame Rose amongst his dogs, and as he had immortalised in the *Fuoco* the names of his favourites of the Capponcina, so, in the pages of the *Leda* he paid the same tribute to the favourites of his French kennels. He describes as follows a small intimate scene which took place in the courtyard of Dame Rose:—

"The famous Meg had not yet finished suckling her dozen spotted puppies which had been born that morning. With childlike fondness she conversed with her favourites, who seemed to understand her and yapped back shrilly. The unconquerable Agitator flashed his green eyes, which looked madder than ever; the insatiable Nut jumped around like a kangaroo, begging continuously for something to devour; the demoniac group of black dogs, headed by the enormous Great-Man, remained taciturnly apart as though in ambush, and my sweet Dorset, honey-coloured and highly-strung like a sensitive harp, would not abandon her ermine-like pose of seeming to dread contamination."

But the best runner, the bitch White Havana, and other young "hopes" full of promise, such as Dorset, Red, Gladiator, Great-Man, Dannat, Donatella, Dannazione, Danno, Meg, Agitator, Nut, Delrosa, and Plotinus, described by his master as "*the fastest dog of his day*," were not given the chance of proving their prowess. The war broke out and swept everything away.

* * * * *

It was August 1914. From the windows of the apartment which D'Annunzio occupied in the Avenue Kléber one could see the Gothas and the old Taubes dropping their little old-time bombs on the capital. From the Eiffel Tower there was borne on the wind the stutter of the machine-guns. The German armies, flooding all the roads to Paris, were now within a few hours' march of the capital.

D'Annunzio, who had never trembled for his own safety, now trembled for that of his dogs. He adored them. For him, "*they were capricious children and tremendous instruments of victory, cruel beasts and timid damozels, taciturn thinkers, and inexorable*

destroyers. *I love them,*" he wrote, "*as one loves a tender or untrustworthy woman—a mixture of ardour and flightiness, of frenzy and gloom.*"

"For whole days I rushed from place to place in the hope of finding some means of conveying them to Paris, or, failing that, some refuge to harbour them. It was impossible." The Parisians, reasonably enough, only smiled at the minor tragedy of the Poet, having greater and graver troubles of their own to face.

Besides, it was written in the Book of Destiny that the Germans were never to enter Paris, or even Villacoublay, though the latter was in their path.

The dogs also had to submit without protest to the fatal restrictions of the war. "Red meat" was never again mentioned. A few biscuits, a little milk—that was all. The experience was anything but cheerful for them.

"*They no longer enjoyed their morning games, their gambols across the soft ground, between walls gilded by the sun and tinged with blue where the shadows fell. Now they were always led on the leash.*"

Nevertheless, they lived and multiplied, even when faced with a new emergency.

"*The solitary enclosure of 'Dame Rose,' "* as D'Annunzio tells us, "*was requisitioned and filled with cattle destined for the slaughter-house—transformed into a dark dismal sewer, from which issued the lowing of the animals attacked with aphtha.*"

Actually, and without trying to put the worst construction on conditions, it is true that about a hundred lean milch cows, which belonged to the Commissariat of the entrenched camp of Paris, had quietly taken possession of the courtyards and the grounds belonging to the farm "Dame Rose." D'Annunzio naturally lodged an energetic protest against this high-handed procedure. But in time of war if, on the one hand, each day brought new and often unforeseen developments, it was rarely possible to trace to their sources the orders which determined them.

The municipality of Paris laid the blame on the shoulders of the Government; the department concerned shifted the responsibility on to the Municipality of Versailles. The Mayor of Versailles declared that it fell within the province of the Ministry for War . . . and the cows remained where they were, unperturbed . . .

In the meantime, the danger of the German occupation having vanished, D'Annunzio sent me to the office of the Governor of Paris, General Galliéni, to find out whether it was possible to free the farm of its alien guests. The heroic general received me most amicably, smiled at my request (he had a sincere liking for D'Annunzio and a thorough understanding of the artistic temperament), and told me that I could reassure the Poet, because, in spite of his numerous and grave preoccupations, he would not fail to give an immediate order to have the four-footed invaders removed. In fact, he did this at once, in my presence. But even more tenacious than the Germans, in spite of Galliéni's order, the cows remained. Next the Minister, Louis Barthou, former President of the Council, was approached by D'Annunzio and asked to take steps in the matter, but his intervention was fruitless, and no further progress was achieved.

Confronted by a fatality which seemed invincible, and tired out by his futile efforts, D'Annunzio bowed his head to the inevitable; but a few days later, happening to meet the famous Cécile Sorrel of the Comédie Française, he recounted the incredible story to her.

"I shall take up the matter this very evening," announced the charming actress.

The next day (miracle of feminine omnipotence!) the cows disappeared as though spirited away.

"*It is my own fault,*" D'Annunzio concluded; "*that's where I should have started.*" But, as usual, whilst later on he was to recount the tragic invasion of the slaughter-house cattle, he kept silent with regard to its humorous sequel.

* * * * *

The "canine stable," in spite of the efforts put forth by its two owners, was dispersed two months later. By now it was April 1915, and the Poet was on the eve of his departure for Italy.

Some of the greyhounds were sold, others given away as presents: two of them had the honour of ending their life at the side of the future Maréchal Pétain, a simple Colonel at the time. One of them was adopted by the writer, Pierre Frondaie. A third passed into the hands of a lady belonging to the French aristocracy, who had a passion for dogs; until its demise it spent

all its days on a vast mattress, which was covered in pale blue velvet and, if this is not a legend, restuffed every day. To-day its embalmed remains repose in a park at Poitou under a mausoleum of white marble.

Two magnificent and gigantic Russian greyhounds, named respectively Gog and Magog, were taken by me to Italy when I answered the call to arms and rejoined my regiment. By then Italy had been at war for three months. D'Annunzio was already the idol of the crowds and soldiers, so that, as the magic name of the Poet was engraved on their collars, our journey was turned into a triumphal progress; at all the stations the soldiers covered the dogs with caresses and, in spite of my protests, stuffed them with sweets and with meat.

Gog and Magog did not remain near their master. They were not war dogs and would have been unable to accompany him. D'Annunzio presented them to a foreign lady, who owned some Persian carpets—a fitting background for their regal indolence.

By the irony of Fate, to the great lover of dogs, a soldier now, there remained only a small fox-terrier called Friquette, which arrived from France in a basket together with the furniture from Arcachon, and was installed by the Poet in Venice until the end of the war.

However, he did not forget his dogs. In writing to me, casting his thoughts back to Dame Rose, not without a touch of irreverence, he said: "*It is the tomb of my poor Dorset, which I see there in a corner; a barrow, resembling the tumuli of the soldiers, under the cypresses of Aquileia in the shadow of the venerable church tower.*"

At Fiume another greyhound came on the scene. This was also a bitch, and her name was Crissa. Marcel Boulenger, who was also a great dog-lover, wrote after having seen her: "Comely and graceful, a beautiful greyhound bitch, short-haired and white with a bluish sheen, bounded lightly into the room. We noticed with joy that Gabriele D'Annunzio, although he had become a first-class statesman, nevertheless remained faithful to his old love, and jealously kept greyhounds in the most secret recesses of his palace, like the sultan who keeps a favourite hidden in his tent."

Crissa followed the Poet to the Vittoriale, and was, for some time, the only representative of the canine race who was allowed to share the new existence of the *Comandante*. Later, in the gardens of the Vittoriale, ten mastiffs mounted guard. As D'Annunzio had written far back in 1884: "*These dogs of a leaden colour, who look like serpents not yet transformed into dogs . . .*" His favourite dog was Danno and his favourite bitch Dannissa. "*Dannissa, my favourite mastiff, the most graceful creature in the world, restores to me the love and the ardour of life.*"

One of these mastiffs one day bit the shoulder of an actress who had come to pay a visit to the Poet. From that day D'Annunzio had the dogs locked in the kennels whenever a visitor had to walk alone through the gardens.

* * * * *

D'Annunzio's horses, "*the sons of the wind,*" as he called them, are no less famous than his dogs.

We must look back quite a few years—many years before he served in the army as a voluntary soldier of a cavalry regiment—if we wish to find the name of his first equine favourite. His name was Aquilino, and it was a small bay from Sardinia, descended from one "*whose mane and tail were long and thick.*"

We do not know much about this little horse, except that the Poet, who was then quite young, kept him company in a huge room which had been turned into a stable in his house at Pescara.

When I questioned him about the characteristics of this horse, which belongs to his childhood period, D'Annunzio answered: "*He was a ferocious horse,*" and that was all. I have never succeeded in extracting from him any further information regarding the manner and the occasion which confirmed Aquilino's reputed ferocity.

Later on, when he was at college, he preferred another horse, by name Murgiona, whom he poetically renamed Silvano, and called, more or less accurately, his "*beautiful white Arab.*" He also dedicated to him a few verses in the *Primo Vere*.

In a less prehistoric epoch—I mean during his life in Rome, when he rode to hounds—one finds a sorrel, "*Ellinor,*" and two dapple-greys, "*Dedalo*" and "*Magog*"; then "*Tristano,*" a tall

grey, "Wollo" and "Mollo") it was when hunting with the latter that D'Annunzio broke his nose, the horse rearing as he was mounting); "Witziputzli" and finally "Prete," a black pony, a famous jumper who broke the record in the Roman Campagna, jumping forty-four broken walls (*macerie*) in succession, and a short time afterwards falling dead while taking an obstacle during another hunt. D'Annunzio also mentions another horse called "Petite Queue" as belonging to the period of his social activities in Rome. "*It was,*" says the Poet, "*of an appalling ugliness, and was wont to trot with such persistence and monotony that it sometimes drove me to tears.*"

He also had a mare, "Hero." This heroine of all the great Roman steeplechases came from the Roman stables of the breeder Pianchentini. "*She had the honour of dying at the age of eighteen in jumping a hurdle of 54 inches.*"

The Poet, when he evokes this occurrence, prefers to keep silent as to the fate of the rider. The truth is, that whilst poor "Hero" turned a somersault, the Poet was projected a considerable distance.

D'Annunzio's falls from his horses were countless—evidence not that the Poet was a bad rider but that he was a supremely intrepid one. At almost every meeting in the Roman Campagna, every canter on the beach of Pisa, or on the road from Fiesole to Florence, D'Annunzio used to take a toss. The next morning the papers hurried to register it, with small consideration for the *amour-propre* of the horseman, but with great advantage to the notoriety of the Poet. The pseudo-death of the latter, which I have recounted elsewhere, was attributed to his fall from a horse.

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After the better-known horses of the Roman period, let us deal with some others. A short time later we find him the possessor of an Arab pony, "El Nar"; D'Annunzio calls him "*docile ardour of the desert, companion of boundless liberty.*" He had him in Egypt when he went there with Eleanora Duse, and he owed his life to the horse's swiftness, because on a long excursion outside Cairo, whilst innocently wandering from camp to camp, he was set upon by a horde of infuriated Arabs, armed with

cudgels and obviously intent on murder.

But the golden age of D'Annunzio's horses remained that of the Capponcina, between 1904 and 1910. Always a reckless and indefatigable rider, during this period he gave free rein to his sporting ambitions.

Every day, often twice a day, he took long rides across the Florentine hills, and when business with his publishers forced him to stay in Milan, he invariably took an enthusiastic part in the fox-hunts on the heaths of Gallarate. All his letters of that time are full of equestrian allusions.

It seemed as though his whole interest was centred round his horses and their doings. He found a potent ally to share his transitory hobby in a friend who was also mad about horses, the Marchioness Alessandra Carlotta di Rudini. He reached the point at which he was able to lose himself in the long conversations about horses which were carried on in his presence by horse-lovers like Count Scheiber and Count Durini, who never opened their mouths except to speak on this one subject, and for whom anything referring to literature or the theatre was a closed book.

To-day, when he remembers the "horsy" period, he is the first to smile at his mania, which made him prefer a lunch with the trainer Corbella to one with a musician like Boito or a writer like Giacosa; but he also remembers all the names and the qualities of the horses belonging to that epoch. "*Malatesta, an Irish grey; Malatestino, a black horse; Alighi, a sorrel; Simonetta, a dark bay; Veranda, a grey mare; Hippolito, a thoroughbred; and Kelubo, a bay half-breed; Mazzamoriello, Ornella, Icaro, Amaranta, and Undulna.*"

A short time after, however, the ruthless and inevitable destruction of the Capponcina came. The horses, the dogs, and all the rest were scattered. How many died? How many finished their days under the lash of some ignoble coachman or Florentine courier? Not even D'Annunzio can say. We only heard that his favourite, the proud Malatesta, died on the Ponte della Carraia in Florence, disembowelled by the shaft of a dog-cart.

Only three of them were saved from the disaster—Kelubo, Mazzamoriello and Undulna, who one day threw D'Annunzio out of the saddle on the beach of Versilia. These three remained

at Marina di Pisa to await the return of their extravagant master. During the first months of his exile in France D'Annunzio never missed the faithful companions whom he had abandoned. He was so taken up by his social duties and his town life that the thought of riding did not even enter his head—at least, he never gave any signs that it had. But when, in July of 1910, he transferred his quarters to Arcachon and listened to talks about hunting the fox or the wild boar, when he saw packs of baying hounds in the forest and heard the call of the hunting horn, the dormant ardour in him awoke once more. Then only did he realize that to keep three horses in a livery stable at Marina di Pisa whilst he was hiring others at Arcachon was extremely stupid and costly. These reflections resulted in my taking the train for Italy a few days later on various errands, not the least of which was to bring back Kelubo and Mazzamoriello to their master, who, however, for some unknown reason, abandoned Undulna to her fate.

The first part of the journey evolved on normal lines; but when I arrived at Marina di Pisa, having spent all the money which one is apt to spend whilst travelling (namely, double the amount of one's calculations), when, as I say, I at last found myself without a penny, things changed.

After some strenuous calculations I realised that I had just enough money to cross the frontier with my quadrupeds, and at the most reach Nice. It would have been childish on my part to wire to the Poet for more money, especially while I was still in Italy. "Let me take them along to Nice," I thought, "and after that some good fairy will provide."

The fairy in whom I was putting my trust proved to be the head-waiter of the Hôtel Ruhl at Nice, who luckily knew me from former visits. Moreover, who would have refused credit to a gentleman who took up his abode at the first hotel of the city, accompanied by two saddle-horses and a groom?

In fact, he showed scant astonishment when, after a stay of two days, I candidly confessed to him that I had lost all my money at Monte Carlo and that I stood in urgent need of a thousand francs to pay my bill and proceed on my way to Arcachon. He gave them to me at once, and I was thus enabled to arrive at my destination two days later.

D'Annunzio was so jubilant at recovering his horses that he made no reference to the subject of the loan, which, so far as the *maitre d'hôtel* was concerned, was only refunded a year later.

That is another story, as Rudyard Kipling would say.

Kelubo and Mazzamoriello were thus able to gallop along the dunes of the Atlantic and in the forests of the Landes until D'Annunzio's departure for Paris two years later, harbouring the illusion that they would never again be abandoned by their beloved master. Nevertheless, their Odyssey came to an inglorious end.

Mazzamoriello was used to settle the unpaid account for fodder a few months later, thus remaining at Arcachon.

The fate of the half-breed, Kelubo, deserves to be mentioned in detail because it represents one of the numerous proofs of the contradictory character of D'Annunzio.

When he had been a few days at the Trianon Palace in Versailles the Poet wrote to me to come from Arcachon and to bring with me Kelubo. The horse was quartered in some near-by stables.

In the course of three months D'Annunzio did not once ride Kelubo. It seemed as though he had completely forgotten why he had asked me to bring him the animal, but when he was called upon to pay the bill for the fourth month of his keep, he suddenly realised that the hunter was costing him a great deal of money.

The friends to whom he spoke of the matter were interested to find out what horse D'Annunzio referred to. He told them: "*A magnificent four-year-old thoroughbred. I paid 10,000 lire for him. I would gladly sell him.*"

Apart from the adjective "magnificent," which described truthfully his personal opinion, this was an invention, imagined on the spur of the moment, because Kelubo was a half-breed, he was nearly eight years old, and he had cost not one penny but his keep, for the Poet had not yet paid for him.

His friends were intrigued and began by assuring him that in Paris he could certainly sell the animal for seven or eight thousand francs, if not more. This estimate was based purely on D'Annunzio's description, which was at variance with facts. This sweet dream only lasted two days, because no sooner

had I questioned the horse-dealer who was stabling him, and who, in view of his competence in equine matters, was not open to influence, than he informed me that, putting it at a high figure, all we could hope to get was between 1000 and 1500 francs.

I cannot describe to you the rage of D'Annunzio, who, having announced *urbi et orbi* that he was a four-year-old thoroughbred, had no wish to withdraw his claim, the more so as he had ended by believing it himself.

In the meantime he no longer even paid for his keep, and when another month had gone the horse-dealer, who saw no difference whatever between a great poet and lesser clients, after taking various steps in the matter, put up the horse to auction at Tattersall's in Paris, with the result that Kelubo was sold for 275 francs.

The following is D'Annunzio's version:

"I was at that time the owner of a magnificent thoroughbred, by name Kelubo. He had cost me 15,000 lire. One fine day the horse-dealer who had charge of him sold him treacherously for a miserable 300 francs. I could have sent him to prison, but with my usual slackness I did not do so."

And he concluded sadly: *"This kind of thing only happens to me."*

What amuses me most, however, is that, whenever he indulged in one of those painful reminiscences he glanced at me significantly, as though to say: "However quiet you may keep, it is mainly your fault that all this has happened."

During the war he had two horses, both Irish, one of which he called Doberdò and the other Vai-Vai. When riding in the country he met a peasant, and asked him jestingly, *"What name shall I give this horse?"* The peasant, thinking that he was joking, answered him, "Vai-Vai!" ("Go on! Go on!") and D'Annunzio enthusiastically adopted this appellation.

"With that horse," said D'Annunzio, *"I would have entered Trieste during the first months of the war . . ."* adding sadly, *"if the generals had not been so stupid!"*

He also refers to these two horses in the *Leda*, recalling a walk which he took near Cervignano. *"The muffled tread of Vai-Vai, who is following, seems to draw out my melancholy by*

its musical rhythm in a way which I cannot express.

"Doberdò snorts, and from time to time cooes like a turtle-dove."

At Fiume, during the occupation, he also possessed two horses, Carnaro and Spalato, but rode them only rarely. Spalato followed him from Fiume to Gardone and D'Annunzio re-baptized him "Fiumanin."

But of this last representative of the equine race in his stables the Poet only recalled a terribly prosaic episode.

In fact, one of his letters sent to me in Milan in September 1921, contained this laconic and melancholy communication: *"I must inform you that two days ago Fiumanin was castrated; I have spent 448 lire. The vet and his assistant held a banquet at my expense."* From that day D'Annunzio, who at that time had become the owner of a villa on the Lago di Garda, called "Il Seraglio," named the horse *"the Eunuch of the Seraglio."*

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He never had a special liking for cats, for he did not see them in the light of semi-sacred animals gifted with special faculties, such as are attributed to them by all their devotees. For the Poet the cat was no more than a fascinating animal whose claim to sympathy lay in its independence, its extreme cleanliness and its amorous ardour—three gifts shared equally with D'Annunzio. He never allowed a cat to lie on his knees or on his writing table. Nevertheless, there was always a cat somewhere about the house.

There was a certain Tigretto he considered as his favourite and to whom he dedicated the following hexameter at the age of seventeen: *"Stretched out on the wall, he slumbers like a pasha."*

Tigretto was followed by a tabby-cat which had furtively entered his house in Rome at the time when he was writing the *Innocente*, and which was called by him *"Vague little soul,"* suggesting perhaps that, because of her immaculate fur, she was an angel of purity.

A short time later he had occasion to modify his opinion. *"She returned to me one night after having disported herself, like a Messalina, with at least a hundred cats, and we had to kill her because of the deplorable condition in which we found her."*

Next, the cat Miramar, "*tiny, with lovely eyes of a sky-blue colour,*" which was presented to him on the day of the battle of the Timavo, and for that reason received the fateful name of the Triestine castle.

This is how he wrote to me in 1918 from Venice, to announce the arrival of the small guest: "*I also have a cat called Miramar. He is without perfidy, and even a bit too suave for my taste.*"

After a few days of beatific life little Miramar died at the Vittoriale, and my old mother, to console D'Annunzio for his loss, sent him a small Angora tabby-cat, Gin-Gin.

"*Kind friend, always near, although far away,*" he wrote in answer. "*How can I thank you for this naïve gift?*"

"*It has proved an unexpected comfort after the angelic death of my Miramar, renamed Zan-Zan by my intimates who are unworthy of her heroic name.*"

Little Gin-Gin, gifted with a fantastic prolificness, presented him with forty-two kittens in a few years. Several of her descendants still hold sway in the kitchens of the Vittoriale.

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At the beginning of this chapter I have mentioned several animals which, apart from dogs, horses, and cats, have had the good luck to live in close proximity to D'Annunzio, and I have called them "*inferior*" animals. They were (I use the past tense because they are all now dead), in the first place, a tall wading-bird of the heron family, called Evandro by the Poet; a Chinese fish and a phenomenal tortoise which answered to the *bourgeois* name of Caroline. Evandro's chief virtue lay in his imperturbable dignity, and his outstanding defect was his idiosyncrasy with regard to symphonic music.

I contend that his dignity could not be equalled by any human creature. Even the two soldiers who had snared him at the mouth of the river Timavo, in order to make a present of him to the "*Signor Colonel D'Annunzio,*" reported their impression of the special distinction which had characterised the bearing of the captive.

The resistance he had shown had been directed against the somewhat rough manner in which he had been taken prisoner rather than against the fact itself.

Every one of his movements and gestures, even as time went on, bore the impress of a great and severe self-respect, combined with a controlled and measured correctness towards others.

I have never met a President of the League of Nations, but—why I do not know—I have always imagined him as a man of great moral elevation, conscious of his own dignity, sparing of words, restrained in his gestures, austere in every one of his manifestations, formal and cold, as it behoves the supreme head of that Assembly. Now, with all the respect due to his lofty functions and to his no less respectable person, I shall take the liberty of declaring that if one day there were to be established a league of the animals of creation, the bittern would, without doubt, be the animal most adapted to assume its presidency.

For Evandro did not consider that, to form part of the Poet's household, constituted the much desired prize which it did for the other animals, who manifested their appreciation by barking, tail-wagging, mewling, neighing, braying, and so forth. Evandro always treated it as a sort of honour which was due to him, an honour of which he no doubt appreciated the full importance, yet which did not make him depart by one iota from his impersonation of an impeccable "gentleman" out of a Dickens novel.

But no one in the house, not even its master, was able to influence his behaviour. If, for instance, fish (his habitual nourishment) were served to him in the kitchen, he at once carried it into the garden. Noticing his preference, the servants carried it into the garden for him, whereupon Evandro took it in his beak and carried it immediately into the dressing-room on the first floor.

Sometimes D'Annunzio—for his own diversion and for that of his visitors—would have liked him to stay in the drawing-room, but Evandro, perverse as ever, spent the whole day looking at the Canale Grande from a window.

On other occasions the Poet wished to remain undisturbed with a visitor in the drawing-room; the bittern, then, with the precise gestures of a Head of Department proceeding to his writing-table, would install himself behind the piano, pretending to be asleep, and listen to the conversation, considering it of

growing interest as it became more intimate. We had only one proof of his dislike of music, but it was conclusive. The composer Malipiero used to come sometimes to the Casetta Rossa, and D'Annunzio, who had a great liking both for him and for his music, quite often asked him to sit down at the piano and play one of his own compositions.

One day the good Malipiero arrived at the Casetta Rossa and was shown into the music-room, where, a few moments later, he was joined by D'Annunzio. Malipiero sat down at the piano, but no sooner had he touched the keys than Evandro, of whose presence we were unaware, emerged from behind the screen where he was accustomed to rest for many hours meditating upon his own affairs, and traversed the length of the drawing-room in a disdainful attitude, only mitigated by his perfect manners as he made for the door, bending slightly forward. When he passed in front of Malipiero, the composer looked at him and said: "Look how refined he is! He walks on the tips of his toes."

From that day, whenever Malipiero visited us the bittern did not even wait for him to sit down at the piano but went away as soon as he caught sight of him. Later on I read a book in which it is asserted that the bittern sings; I cannot say whether this is accurate. If so, it means that this bird resembled the late tenor Borgatti, who sang remarkably well but hated symphonic music.

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With regard to the little fish, it had the common sense not to live in D'Annunzio's house at the same time as the bittern, because in that case, instead of reposing to-day in a small and respected tomb in the gardens of Versailles, he would have ended in an indecorous and humiliating fashion in Evandro's stomach. His brief biography is bound up (unforeseen contingency for a fish!) with two grave psychic problems: that of telepathy and that of premonition.

D'Annunzio became its possessor in an unpremeditated fashion. He did not buy it, neither did he receive it as a present. He won the fish by his ability and by the sweat of his brow.

It was at the time of the rehearsals of *Saint-Sébastien*,

and, as I have already said, D'Annunzio lived in Versailles, whence he used to return for dinner by motor-car after the afternoon rehearsals at the Théâtre du Châtelet. One day he did not return, and we awaited him in vain until 8 p.m. at the Trianon Palace. We then became anxious and started telephoning. At the theatre they said that the Poet had left at half-past five, and the commissionaire had distinctly heard him give the chauffeur his Versailles address.

What had happened?

Something perfectly simple. D'Annunzio, on his way back, had found himself in the suburbs of the capital in the midst of a fair, held in celebration of some national festival, and his ever youthful and alert curiosity had induced him to stop the car and descend to visit the booths, beginning with the inevitable circus and the mermaid and concluding with the likewise inevitable shooting-galleries. He had stopped and chosen a stall where the prices seemed reasonable, and there embarked upon the conscientious labours of a William Tell, smashing eggs balanced on jets of water, shooting corks off bottles, etc., etc. After a full hour of intensive shooting and a wastage of cartridges, only equalled in a quarter of an hour's firing on the Carso, he had won . . . a diminutive Chinese fish in a crystal receptacle of the same proportions.

When, later on, we made up our accounts, we were able to establish the fact that (without counting the glory which, as everyone knows, is without price) the fish cost him roughly 1000 francs per pound—a circumstance which, considering D'Annunzio's temperament, rendered the animal still dearer to him.

From that day Li Tai Pè (thus D'Annunzio christened his new guest) lived beside the Poet in a small sitting-room at the Trianon Palace, even sharing the close intimacy of his bedroom, an honour which the Poet never accorded to any other animal, perhaps due to Li Tai Pè's constitutional inability to impart anything of what he might see.

Li Tai Pè's end, if not tragic, was at least pathetic. When leaving Versailles to return to his hermitage, confronted by an apparently insurmountable difficulty of transport, D'Annunzio gave way to the suasion of a lovely lady who lived at Versailles

all the year round and had taken a liking to the little golden animal, the silent witness of some unforgettable hours. After much hesitation he abandoned it to the new destiny and the new mistress. But he did not forget it. He wrote to me one day from Arcachon, when I had remained in Paris: "*I am thinking about the poor little fish, and feel remorseful that I did not bring him with me.*" But neither did Li Tai Pè forget the Poet.

Two months later, whilst we were lunching together at Arcachon, D'Annunzio broke the silence and said to me: "*I have dreamt all night about the little fish we have left at Versailles. Some misfortune must have befallen it.*"

On the following day he received from the lady to whom he had entrusted his treasure a brief letter, in which she told him how distressed she had been the day before to find Li Tai Pè dead. She had buried it in the garden of the Trianon Palace.

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The fate of Caroline the tortoise was similar to that of many great human personalities. She only became famous *after* her death, a death which had a close analogy to that of one of D'Annunzio's heroines, La Pisanella.

Whilst the latter, in the tragedy of that name, dies suffocated by roses, Caroline died on a moonlit night from a surfeit of tuberoses, 3000 in number, which she had nipped off with her sharp teeth in the gardens of the Vittoriale (at least, thus affirms the Poet, who may be guilty of some slight exaggeration as to the amplitude of this perfumed repast). It is obvious that if we substitute the name of Caroline for that of the heroine of the Cypriote tragedy, Pisanella, the sub-title could also magnificently fit the tragedy of the Vittoriale, for it is "Perfumed Death."

The tortoise, although endowed with a tough and long-suffering digestion, had so badly assimilated the petals as to die from them, and was handed over by the Poet to the dermatologist, who stuffed her. The magnificent husk was handed over to the sculptor Brozzi, who immortalised Caroline, moulding and reproducing with wonderful skill the four feet, the head and the tail in gilded bronze.

On his own initiative D'Annunzio added the motto, "*Intra*

me maneo," which, executed in pure bronze, shines in the middle of the pedestal.

The tortoise, raised in such fashion to the rank of a symbol, now mounts guard between the folds of a tent of grey suède, at the threshold of the "Room of the Leper" in the Vittoriale.

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This chapter would not be complete if I did not also refer to the superstitious, not to say mysterious, attachment which D'Annunzio evinced for a legendary animal, the Sphinx.

Just as during his childhood he loved with a love born of gratitude the Chimera of Arezzo, which had presided over his first amorous caresses, so during his maturity he loved a stone sphinx.

It was one of those rare seven-hundred-year-old sphinxes belonging to the period of Clodion of which there are still a few specimens in French gardens, and which, instead of the Egyptian face of a woman, carries above her animal body the face of a powdered and painted lady. During his stay in Paris D'Annunzio often went to see her, and—I cannot say whether in earnest or in jest—consulted her before making any important decision.

CHAPTER X

THE EXILE

Hôtel Meurice—The clothes of His Excellency Signor Tittoni—The swan-song—Three victims of D'Annunzio—D'Artagnan comes on the scene—The midnight conspiracy—The three emeralds—The tragedy of the epigraph—The flight—D'Annunzio teaches French to the Countess de Noailles—"My *Watteau*"—The mysterious Buddhas—The Opera Ball—The leopard in the cellar—The confessions of a Hungarian magnate—D'Annunzio and the tragedy of Meyerling—"Ex putredine vita"

MANY people who, on moral, political, and literary grounds, have only a lukewarm sympathy for D'Annunzio, will talk with the most profound gravity of the Poet's "exile in France," while his admirers, sycophants, and enthusiasts have for five and a half years consistently glorified the French period of D'Annunzio's life, representing it in glowing colours as the sublime sacrifice of the exile, and contrasting it with the ingratitude of the mother country towards her illustrious son.

The names of the greatest exiles, from Ovid and Dante to Foscolo and Mazzini, have been complacently set side by side with his; and no one has dreamed of protesting against the inclusion of Gabriele D'Annunzio in this legion of authentic martyrs to a Utopian cause, who abandoned everything—country, family ties, comfort, and peace—to avoid oppression or escape defeat.

Well—I confess it candidly—every time I hear the word "exile" applied to D'Annunzio I have to smile. This same D'Annunzio who has ended by accepting this pathetic and heroic interpretation of his absence from Italy, as imperturbably as he has appropriated any outside idea, which has attracted him and which, later on, he has vivified and embellished with his own genial fantasy—this same D'Annunzio had not at first the smallest intention of endowing his simple journey with so tragic and grandiose a character.

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Like any other modest traveller who goes to Paris for a fortnight, he left Genoa at the end of January, 1910, accompanied by his faithful servant Rocco Pesce, a couple of trunks, and the inevitable dressing-case. He wired to me—for I was already in Paris on my own business—telling me how happy he was that I had remained to meet him there, and so absolute was his conviction that he would only stay long enough to expedite a few of his own concerns that he replied to a telegram, in which I asked him whether I might go to London for a few days prior to his arrival in Paris, as follows: "*Await me in Paris if you wish us to meet. I shall only remain a very short time.*"

That, having left Italy for a few weeks, he should remain in France nearly six years, never crossing the frontier, even for an hour, will only surprise those who, having had no personal contact with D'Annunzio, are ignorant of his faculty for adaptation, his complete detachment from the past, from events, things and people, and of his indescribable and boundless antipathy to everything pertaining to travel, change of residence, or the removal of his own person or of the objects surrounding him to another place.

It can be affirmed without a shadow of irony that, leaving aside his return to Italy in May, 1915, made at the will of Fate, and in answer to the imperious call of his country, all the important changes of his life have been determined only by two irresistible factors: bailiffs in time of peace and cannon in time of war.

Fate familiarised him with the first during the long, early periods of his life, and with the second he was destined to grow familiar later on. I may add that neither the one nor the other, however powerfully they influenced his movements, ever caused him any real concern. My old friend Paolo Orano wrote in 1917 (*L'Opinion*, 26th May): "One day historians will seek—and seek in vain—the reason which in 1910 induced Gabriele D'Annunzio to come and live in France, there to create works written in pure and exquisite French, and to win love for himself and for Italy."

He might have added that the persistent error of historians is to try to explain events in a man's life by outside circumstances, instead of looking for their cause in the man himself.

Gabriele D'Annunzio arrived in Paris, and took up his quarters at the Hôtel Meurice, in the Rue de Rivoli. It was a tradition of the period that distinguished visitors of Italian nationality should give preference to this opulent but quiet hotel. The Ambassadors of the King of Italy stayed there when they were taking over from their predecessors, as did noted scientists, bankers and business men. There was an arrangement by which attachés and secretaries of the Embassy took their meals at the Meurice being given the best attention. Gabriele D'Annunzio, however, stayed there for about six months, living "perilously," in accordance with Mussolini's famous precept, but without being entitled to preferential treatment.

D'Annunzio was given a sunny apartment on the fourth floor, overlooking the gardens of the Tuileries. The second floor was occupied by His Excellency Signor Tittoni, recently appointed to the Italian Embassy in Paris; the third, by a freak of destiny, by Guglielmo Marconi. The clients of the third and fourth floors were intimate friends of long standing, but the same could not be said of the clients of the fourth and second, who had scant liking for each other, or even, to be frank, any liking at all.

"How do you expect," said D'Annunzio's faithful servant to me in that picturesque Abruzzian dialect which he had used with his master for twenty years, "how do you expect the master to get on with Tittoni? My master, ever since I have been in his service, has always changed his suit at least three times a day, while I have heard from His Excellency's valet, who is a friend of mine, that whilst Tittoni has a suit for every day of the week his time is too occupied to change so often"; and he raised his arms in despair.

Personally, I did not believe that the question of clothes was the only one on which they failed to agree. And that I was right was proved five years later at the beginning of the European war; but I shall return to that at another time.

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D'Annunzio's first week in Paris was, as usual, given up to a frenzied spending of the money which he had brought with him; the second to an equally frenzied search for new funds to

replace those which he had exhausted. The first caused the Poet no difficulty whatsoever; the second was facilitated by the "Society of Authors" and by the publisher Calmann Levy, who, though a perfectly agreeable and most distinguished gentleman, never forgot, even on these occasions, that it was sound policy to obtain a good percentage on investments, so that any monetary advance was compensated by concessions, on the part of D'Annunzio, covering periods of at least five years.

D'Annunzio, having thus temporarily solved the financial question by obtaining a loan of 100,000 francs, precipitated himself headlong into the life of Paris. It should not be forgotten that all this was in 1910, that golden age when a thousand-franc note was worth at least ten times what it is to-day.

I believe that never once in his long adventurous existence did D'Annunzio pass through a more phantasmagoric or more kaleidoscopic period, or a more useless one, than that which he spent in Paris between January and July 1910.

I do not employ the adjective "useless" unthinkingly, for if on the one hand D'Annunzio lived a life full of sexual adventure, both intensive and debilitating, if he saw and took part in happenings which represented in his eyes something absolutely new which he had never before experienced, on the other hand, his creative and analytical genius might have used this accumulation of visions, sensations and observations to produce a masterpiece.

Yet all that remained to D'Annunzio was a melancholy disgust for all that he had witnessed, and an indescribable physical exhaustion.

Endowed by nature with the most implacable and colossal egoism ever implanted in a human being, he could have re-echoed the Poet with sadness: "Look not for my heart; the beasts have devoured it."

Day after day, night after night, for five months he went where he listed, where sensationalism called, or where prurient adventure awaited him—adventure often banal and unworthy of him.

These months in Paris were the "swan-song" (I apologise to the pure lover of *Leda* for the unflattering comparison) of the animal side of Gabriele D'Annunzio's life. During that turbulent

period the hearts of two women were to break—and did break—because of him. Of these hearts, one offered him for close on two years the most savage, the most complete and absolute proof of self-immolation and of passionate devotion of which a woman is capable towards a man. The other heralded the dawn of a new love which, spiritual and sweet though it was, was employed by D'Annunzio to lacerate and destroy the first one. Then, only four months after it was born, like a sudden blaze, it was fated to be extinguished in the heart of the Poet.

I was present, a daily and inevitable witness of D'Annunzio's life, at the death agony of his first love, caused by the surging up of the ephemeral passion which succeeded it: similarly I was present at the rapid disintegration of the second, which ended in the Poet's flight from Paris, after he had been there only six months. Call it a flight, and not a departure, for it was the flight of a D'Annunzio, debased, tired, weakened, disgusted and spineless, leaving the great corrupt city to flee to the lonely refuge of Moulleau, between the pine groves and the Atlantic, where, as we shall see later, a third woman was awaiting him.

The lives of all men, especially of those who are constitutionally sexual, have passed through such periods, and the Gospel, with its divine and at the same time humane understanding, exhorts us not to cast the first stone. But there is a limit in questions concerning the feminine sex beyond which the love of adventure and the attraction of the unknown border on depravity; and it is this crude expression, and not another, which we must have the courage and the sincerity to use in connection with a type of temperament such as D'Annunzio's. Basing our argument on the *homo sum* of Lucrezio, we can show indulgence and forgiveness in judging the sudden termination of one love-affair, the rapid flaring up of a second, which after a few months was to leave only ashes behind it, and even the advent of a third. What we cannot pass is that, concurrently with the development of these three dramas of passion, a man of fifty should be so cynical and so ridden by desire as to carry on a dozen other minor adventures; and since the word "drama" can only be applied to his relationship with the three women to whom he gave the names of "Donatella," "Piccola" and "Cenerina," fatal

and predestined victims of his constitutional and incurable egoism, we are forced to admit, while refuting any accusation of being too straitened, that D'Annunzio's heroic figure visibly shrank after this first period of his so-called "exile," which his devotees strive so hard to present in a purely Dantesque light.

When I speak of "victims" the word must be understood in a relative sense, for two of the three are still alive, and living normal lives in comfortable circumstances; but when we speak of "killing," we are not speaking literally. One can effectively "kill" a woman by destroying her morally, by rendering her unfit to combat life, by casting her into despair and setting her on the road to ruin. And these charges undoubtedly lie at the door of D'Annunzio, who acted with that truly Olympian indifference which has characterised all his relationships with womankind, *apart from his mother*.

The dissipated and futile life which D'Annunzio led at this time was the result not only of will and inclination, but was in part also due to surroundings and circumstance.

The Paris of the time, for those who still remember it with a certain nostalgia—as an old roué recalls the kisses willingly offered by fresh young lips—was a place where polished elegance, the joy of living, and freedom from care had reached their vertiginous apex.

It seemed that all lived only for the sake of enjoyment, and such an abundance of unforeseen and novel experiences fell to the lot of individuals of every social category that it looked as though the golden age were about to return.

Perhaps Fate, who knew that the greatest war that the world had ever known was already in the offing, conceded this last comfort to thousands of mortals.

Given the universal facilities for amusement, it is easy to understand how much greater they were for a privileged being like D'Annunzio, "*que le monde et le demi-monde s'arrachaient*." Also he had now accumulated a great hunger for sensations forgotten during a period of ten years which, though far from chaste, had been spent totally outside so-called "social" circles.

Paris thus became for him a replica, on a more magnificent scale, of the famous "pleasant time" of Rome.

In those first six months, between January and July 1910,

Gabriele D'Annunzio became, in the widest sense of the word, the "rage" of the Paris season.

Paris never stops to discuss its idol, for every season it erects a new one. It matters little whether he be called General Boulanger, Picasso, Josephine Baker, or Carpentier; whether he is a great writer, a great fencer, a great swindler or an authentic genius: Paris, moved by an indefinable collective interest or merely by tradition, must have its "attraction," its star-turn on the posters of its yearly production. This "attraction," this "star-number," does not need to be chosen by a special Commission, like that which, each year, elects the Queen of the Halles or of the Midinettes; the procedure is automatic, imposed by a silent plebiscite, against which there is no appeal. During a certain period, which may last a fortnight or a year—the latter period, however, is rare—the idol can do exactly as he pleases. He enjoys the most absolute and autocratic immunity.

The *salons* fight for possession of him. People point him out in the street. Theatrical managers and restaurant proprietors are not only flattered, but intoxicated, by his presence. No festivity, no reception, no celebration, can be regarded as a success without the participation of the "star." Women or men, as the case may be, go to any extreme to monopolise him, to keep him with them, to live within his orbit.

So it is to-day, and so it was in the time of Julius Cæsar and Vercingetorix.

The idol who knows how to take advantage of this period comes out of it a millionaire and makes provision for the day in which, as Fate decrees, he must retire into obscurity and give place to the inevitable successor, who seizes the sceptre to the famous cry, "The King is dead! Long live the King."

D'Annunzio neither saw his way to turn the exceptional moment to account nor did he wish to do so. He has often been accused of self-advertisement, but wrongfully; his nature withdrew into itself like a hedgehog, when confronted by any situation which imposed definite obligations upon him.

And an idol has to submit to such obligations, especially if he wishes to derive material advantage from his position. Whereas to do what pleases one best, with measure, wisdom, or even with a modicum of eccentricity, may serve even to increase popularity,

yet to do so systematically, openly and shamelessly will rapidly destroy it. It should never be forgotten that popularity is a flame and that one should never play with fire.

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On the arrival of Gabriele D'Annunzio in Paris both the stable and the mobile groups of "Tout-Paris" hastened either to come in person or to send their messenger to the Hôtel Meurice.

By "stable" groups I mean those *milieux* which are so strongly entrenched, both from an intellectual and a mundane point of view, that there can be no question of their standing—it is they who give the tone to the social life of Paris; by "mobile" groups I intend those who possess no more than a transitory notoriety and power, which may sometimes endure only for a season.

D'Annunzio, on principle, began by refusing all invitations. According to him, he had come solely to work, to transact certain business pending between himself and various publishers, and to visit the famous dentist of the Avenue de l'Opéra; after which he intended to leave immediately. The "Octopus City" might put out its tentacles, but he was not to be caught; he had plans of his own—that was the theory. In practice, after a week of comparative isolation, during which he had ample time to be prodigiously bored, he accepted his first official invitation, perhaps because it came from a lady who combined the necessary social qualifications with more intimate charms, always more important in the eyes of the Poet; and the famous "claustration," which, theoretically, should have lain at the root of the Poet's life, but which, actually, only characterised the periods when he was intent upon his work, dissolved into thin air.

As the saying goes, it is always the first step that counts. Thus, for six months D'Annunzio went from a lunch at the Rothschilds', to the race-course at Auteuil, from horse-racing to dog-racing at Saint-Cloud, from an intimate *tête-à-tête* to a first night at the Opéra, from a rendezvous to a private room at the Café de Paris or Voisin, from a musical evening at the Deutsch de la Meurthe to a reunion of authors at the house of Francis de Croisset, and from a fancy-dress ball at Brunelleschi's to the reception of a new member at the Académie Française.

Superficial as these occupations were, they were yet so absorbing that they filled his days from ten o'clock in the morning until one o'clock at night.

What, however, does the stranger visiting Paris do at that time in order to shake off the accumulated tiredness of a whole day? He goes to spend the night at Montmartre: and so did D'Annunzio. Not too often, but often enough to make the fortune of the Cabaret or the Boîte de Nuit on which he had fixed his choice for that evening; and as Paris is a rule unto itself and the cream of its society uses means entirely different from those employed in other cities to achieve the same object, D'Annunzio's genial and happy-go-lucky ways rendered him more famous and sought after than if he had spent his life in austere study and retirement.

One day, whilst I was consuming tea and cakes in his company at Rumpelmayer's, a gentleman of very distinguished appearance came up to me and said in a low voice, "Will you kindly pardon my inquisitiveness, but is the gentleman with you Gabriele D'Annunzio?" And as I answered in the affirmative, he added, "Will you kindly introduce me to the *Maitre*, for Her Majesty the Queen of Naples, whose gentleman-in-waiting I am, has expressed the wish to make his acquaintance."

A few moments later D'Annunzio was paying his respects to an old lady whose eyes had lost none of their brilliance, and was kissing her hand with deference.

The Queen, for forty years an exile in France, had not forgotten the Poet who, in the Garibaldi song, had called her "*the Bavarian eaglet*," and had extolled her superb and virile courage when, disdainful of danger and resplendent with youth and beauty, she inspired with her presence the soldiers under fire on the ramparts of Gaeta.

Besides, wherever he went, whether to a theatre, a restaurant, an hotel, a tea-room or a race-course, even programme-sellers, cooks and jockeys forsook their duties in order to see him. "Here is D'Annunzio! Here is D'Annunzio!" What did it matter that at that time he was close on fifty and that his polished cranium hardly boasted a hair?

This wave of morbid curiosity about him annoyed the Poet, yet at the same time afforded him pleasure. It annoyed him

because at times it interfered with his own convenience; it pleased him, for the simple reason that he was only human, and also because he perfectly realised that celebrity leads to the acquisition of wealth, and the latter was of paramount importance to him. It is my firm conviction that during those six months D'Annunzio must have spent, certainly, not less than 300,000 francs, and since, in 1910, 300,000 francs, at the most modest valuation, represented a million and a half in present currency, it may safely be affirmed that during the period in question the Poet was spending recklessly and heedlessly.

During the initiation of Gabriele D'Annunzio into the magic circle of social Paris, his presiding genius, his manager, and at one time, his Virgil was Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac. The Count was known as an extremely fine writer of prose and verse, and, moreover, as the incorrigible "dandy" of an epoch which had been dead and buried twenty years before. He pitilessly scourged the highest Parisian society, exposing its background of love and family intrigues, its social and literary scandals.

D'Annunzio's genius exercised such a fascination over Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac that the latter shed, in his presence, his horrifying conceit as a writer, his notorious trick of impersonating the Deity, and became not only the companion of D'Annunzio's peregrination, but his Aulic Counsellor, the "*Eminence grise*" of some of his protégé's disgraceful eccentricities.

Whenever unable to be present in person, he made up for the omission by letters, inflicting on the patient and indulgent D'Annunzio dozens of pages filled with feminine and baroque handwriting. In these letters he wrote of everything and of nothing, of art and literature, of men and women, with interminable digressions, and with the most abstruse and contorted puns, the whole seasoned with a flavour of friendly jealousy which led to scenes, followed by the traditional reconciliation.

This hysterical but indubitably sincere and devoted friendship of the old French nobleman, descendant of D'Artagnan (for Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac boasted the famous Musketeer among his ancestors, and still possessed in the Pyrenees the shell of the feudal castle from which D'Artagnan set forth on his famous bay for the conquest of Paris), lasted nearly five years, the

whole period of D'Annunzio's stay in France. The Poet returned it with the affable sweetness which he brought to all his friendships, made up, in this case, for the major part, of patient resignation.

Out of deference to truth it must be stated that two years later it was to have a sympathetic consecration in the preface which D'Annunzio wrote for Montesquiou's book, which bears the title of *La Comtesse de Castiglione*.

I have already mentioned the fact that Montesquiou was D'Annunzio's social adviser, but the heart and temperament of the Musketeer came into their own on the occasion when he organised D'Annunzio's flight from Paris. I maintain that (although, from fear of ridicule, he neither dared say so nor even allude to it), Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac, in the light of his descent from D'Artagnan, was not averse to establishing a certain parallel between his friendship for D'Annunzio and that of his ancestor for Aramis. And for that reason, through a sort of romantic atavism, he took some satisfaction in imitating the exploits of his illustrious predecessor, as he likewise tried to resemble him in the cut of his hair and the trim of his moustache.

He was, therefore, blissfully happy when D'Annunzio confided to him, in profound secrecy, that he was desperately in love with a woman, and seeing that his present mistress, made suspicious by a hundred slight tokens, would, with all the ardour of her raging jealousy, have opposed his departure with his new conquest, it was imperative to organise a flight on an elaborate scale.

This adventure, of course, did not present the same difficulties as Casanova's escape from his prison under the roofs of Venice; nevertheless, the circumstances called for a certain amount of preparation.

A refuge had already been found by the interested lady. In order to snatch the Poet from the woman who at that moment flaunted her rights over him, she had, in her amorous devotion carried her researches beyond the confines of France into England and Spain, in order to discover a place meet for their amours. She had finally decided on the pine-groves of Arcachon, in the French Landes.

I would not like to affirm that D'Annunzio, an old fox who was expert in love affairs, really stood in need of Montesquiou's aid in order to break off his relations with his mistress in an elegant manner. He had known, in many previous ventures, how to avoid scenes of jealousy or even possible tragedies. I rather incline to believe that he turned to the friend because he was afraid that some of his creditors who had arrived from Italy, and whose presence in Paris had not escaped notice, importuned him, but naturally he preferred to appear in a less commonplace aspect in the eyes of his romantic friend, and so gave the amorous cause as the one necessitating his flight.

But if D'Annunzio was not quite sincere in his motives for invoking the help of Montesquiou, on the other hand it is certain that the latter was perfectly sincere in granting it to him, and that he accepted with joy the task of contriving D'Annunzio's disappearance from Paris within all the rules of the game, and with the help of the subterfuges and plots which had filled the readers of *Dumas père* with enthusiasm for half a century.

Robert de Montesquiou wished to follow tradition step by step. Since the flight of such a great man was under consideration, all its details had to be determined in the utmost secrecy. In order to secure this end, it could take place neither from a hotel like the Meurice nor from one of the two thousand small cafés and restaurants which are dotted all over Paris. This would have been far too banal!

One day D'Annunzio, who in his heart had perhaps already given up (as had often happened before) the idea of undertaking a flight in romantic style, heard his friend Montesquiou whispering mysteriously into his ear, during a reception in the house of Baroness Stern, these words, whose meaning was obscure: "To-day at midnight. Antongini will explain."

The conspirator had, in fact, seen me a short while before and had informed me, in the tones of a person following closely the precedent set by the ambush dear to the seventeenth century, that the details of the plot would be unfolded at the Hôtel de L'Isly, near the Gare Saint-Lazare, at midnight. I cannot remember whether Montesquiou had carried respect for historical reconstruction to such an extent as to betake himself

to the rendezvous enveloped in a long cloak, but I know that, exactly like D'Artagnan, he arrived accompanied by the traditional equerry. The latter was a certain Monsieur Henri, a nondescript but faithful creature who for many years had carried out for Robert de Montesquiou offices which resembled those of Planchet for D'Artagnan.

Round the table in a small sitting-room, engaged for the occasion (the French poet was an habitué of the Hôtel de L'Isly and used to spend a night there whenever he came to Paris), D'Annunzio's flight was arranged in all its details. The trunks and suitcases were to be removed one by one from the Hôtel Meurice and gradually assembled in the smaller hotel; D'Annunzio was to arrive there a little later with the last of them in his hand, and from there was to proceed the next day to the Gare d'Orsay to take the train for Arcachon.

I was to remain at the Hôtel Meurice in order to cover the retreat, assuming the air of an unfortunate secretary who had been abandoned by his master and left without orders or money—a condition uncomfortably close to the truth.

The whole of his correspondence was to be redirected by the porter of the Hôtel Meurice to M. Henri, at Chatou, who was to forward it to Arcachon, D'Annunzio's new retreat. The name of that faked residence appeared in the newspapers of the day, and even now Chatou, where D'Annunzio never set foot in all his life, is considered by some of his biographers as one of the favourite haunts of the Poet during his exile in France.

By an excess of precaution it had been decided that from the moment D'Annunzio left Paris he was to assume a new name—Gui d'Arbes—in order to draw a red herring across his trail.

The romantic programme which had been elaborated by Montesquiou on behalf of D'Annunzio was carried out with meticulous precision, and two days later, while M. Gui d'Arbes was already in amorous company, filling his lungs with the balsamic air of the pine-groves of Arcachon; while M. Henri already sorted letters and telegrams at Chatou and while I lived anguished days at the Meurice, Robert de Montesquiou, leaning against one of the mantelpieces of the Faubourg, was replying with his habitual supercilious smile to the society ladies who urgently demanded information about D'Annunzio;

"*Ma foi!* I cannot tell you! He has simply disappeared."

The Italian poet could have given no greater satisfaction to the French poet and friend, Robert de Montesquiou, who adored to such a degree all that flavoured of mystery, that two years later, having gone to Arcachon to pay a visit to D'Annunzio, whose presence in the French Landes was a matter of public knowledge, he also decided to adopt a pseudonym. He remained for a week at the Hôtel du Mouleau under the name of Robert Lecomte, without rhyme or reason for this childish and slightly ridiculous disguise.

* * * * *

At Arcachon there was to begin for D'Annunzio a life which, without being a real exile, vaguely resembled it. I mean thereby one devoted to study and meditation, though not so lonely as he liked it to appear (because, in reality, throughout four years the Poet only remained alone for a fortnight at the most), but at least more regular and productive than had been his life in Paris. "*I disdain,*" he wrote later in regard to this, with laudable sincerity, "*to reply to the stupefaction of those who consider my solitude monastic or Franciscan: Apollo's Delius will always have the last word.*"

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I have already recounted how perfectly futile was D'Annunzio's existence during the first part of his stay in France—in the literary and, I may even say, creative, sense, and in another chapter I have alluded to his extreme faculty for "picking up," which I would compare—were I not afraid of showing disrespect to him—to that of certain famous makes of motor cars. Better than a long dissertation, a cursory instance will give the reader proof of both my statements.

At the beginning of March 1911, while D'Annunzio was still at the Hôtel Meurice, and did not seem to have any intention of changing of rhythm of his leisured days in Paris, a committee was formed by bearers of illustrious names with the object of erecting a marble monument to commemorate the death of Richard Wagner, which took place in the Vendramin Palace in Venice.

Everyone is familiar with the beautiful and severe fifteenth-

century edifice which dominates the entrance to the canal. There the great composer had died on February 13th, 1883, in the arms of his wife Cosima; the foundation stone of the memorial, which was to consecrate for ever the tragic and glorious remembrance of the master's last days in Venice and of his death, was to be laid on the actual site.

The committee, presided over by Ferdinand I, who was then Tsar of Bulgaria, and consisting of the most famous European artists and lovers of art, did not hesitate for a moment in choosing the writer to whom the difficult task of composing the inscription was to be confided.

It could be no other than Gabriele D'Annunzio, for two reasons. Not only had the eminent Poet been a collaborator of Richard Wagner's art, but Fate had destined him to be present in Venice at the moment when the creator of *Tristan* died, and to have borne his bier on his shoulders with three other youthful companions.

Not only that, but this coincidence had inspired D'Annunzio later to write some of the most pathetic pages of his work *Il Fuoco*, where he describes his participation in the last glorious funereal rites which he attributes to the poet Stelio Effrena, hero of his novel.

The members of the committee had been influenced by these multiple circumstances when they addressed themselves to D'Annunzio, who accepted their offer with enthusiasm, only asking for a few days' solitary meditation in order to compose the desired epigraph.

The representatives of the committee, who in the meantime had given publicity both to their offer and to its acceptance, remained silently expectant for one week, then two, then three; but when it came to the fourth week, with D'Annunzio giving no sign of life—not even asking their consent to a further delay—they manifested growing impatience.

The telephone began to ring with monotonous regularity, while imploring letters crowded the Poet's writing-table. Visits by masculine and feminine members of the committee succeeded each other without interruption at every hour, day and night.

Who was it who must telephone, must read the harrowing letters, must communicate them to D'Annunzio and receive the

illustrious callers? Alas! It was always I.

The Poet listened to my reports. He bowed his head like a guilty child and agreed with me that it was time to act . . . but never wrote a line. It looked as though his creative faculty had completely abandoned him.

On the other hand, the members of the committee found themselves in a curious and painful situation: they could neither advance nor—still worse—retreat. How could they substitute the name of another writer for that of D'Annunzio, especially after they had officially blazed his acceptance throughout the European press?

In the meantime, life at the Hôtel Meurice had become practically intolerable, as well for the Poet as for his servants and for myself. In every public part of the hotel there was someone waiting to spring to his feet the moment that he saw me, imploring me for the now famous epigraph. The guilty Poet knew no more peace: when he came home he did not know what corridors to cross in order to regain his own apartment unmolested. This can quite easily be understood by anyone who has ever had anything to do with members of a committee. The situation was turning to tragedy. At last both I and D'Annunzio's faithful servant Rocco grew weary of transmitting every day the same request to the Poet, beseeching him to put an end to this torture. We therefore patiently prepared hundreds of leaflets on which we had written "Epigraph of Wagner!" . . . and we scattered them everywhere, so that they should follow him like an obsession—on the tables, on his bed, in the sitting-room, even in his bath, pinned to the doors and even to his pyjamas. But this new "*Mene, mene, tekel upharsin*" produced no effect. The Poet came in, saw them, lifted his arms heavenwards . . . and wrote nothing. D'Annunzio's ultimate flight put an end to the impossible situation. In the meantime, the assaulting masses, confronted by his unyielding attitude, seemed to resign themselves to the inevitable; but whether they did so or not affected the result in no wise, because once he had arrived at Arcachon we heard nothing more about the matter.

The most perfect peace reigned once more. Even the persecution by letters ceased; Robert de Montesquiou's strategy

had diverted them towards distant Chatou. Life had become a paradise again.

One day, when we had already been at the seaside for a fortnight, I noticed that the Poet was in an excellent humour, that the sky was clear and the ocean calm. Whilst he was drinking coffee in the garden after lunch, I lit a cigarette and watched the smoke drifting towards the pines. With the air and the tone of one who evokes childhood memories, I asked: "... and Wagner's epigraph?" "Oh, yes," he said laughingly, springing up, "*I will do it for you at once,*" and disappeared. Ten minutes later he returned smiling with a sheet of paper in his hand, and handed it to me. On it was the finished epigraph: "*IN THIS PALACE—THE SOULS HEAR—THE LAST BREATH OF RICHARD WAGNER—PERPETUATE ITSELF LIKE THE TIDE—WHICH LAPS ITS MARBLE STEPS.*"

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After he had taken up his new mode of life, he spent his time embellishing his new abode of Saint-Dominique, riding, writing, at times receiving a few rare visitors, talking of his ungrateful mother country and decrying it. After that he began once more to accumulate debts, although on a minor scale.

He only betook himself to the "Octopus City" when he was called there by rehearsals or business with his publishers; actually he resided in the Landes.

The new owner of Saint-Dominique stayed at the Hôtel d'Iéna when he first returned to Paris; later on, when his attendances at the theatre became more frequent and prolonged, D'Annunzio took up his residence in furnished apartments in the Rue d'Artois, in the Rue de Bassano, in the Avenue Matignon, in the Avenue Kléber, at the Trianon Palace at Versailles and finally at the Pavillon du Luxembourg in the Rue Jeoffrey L'Asnier, which domicile we have had occasion to mention in another chapter.

If during the first period in Paris he had been "*l'enfant de volupté*"—a child in spirit, though of advancing years, in relation to the ladies of the French aristocracy, as well as to the wives and mistresses of the "new rich" of the capital—in the succeeding period, 1911 to 1915, D'Annunzio gave preference to artistic and

literary *milieux*; he frequented the *salons* of Madame de Noailles, Madame Régnier, Gérard d'Houville. He often lunched with Loti, Hervieux, Henry de Régnier, Lavedan, Pierre Louys, Madame Catulle Mendès, Léon Blum (who at that time was still a young literary man rather given to snobbishness, though he invited to his table the tribune Jaurès). He even lunched with the painter Brunelleschi and certain others, but D'Annunzio's short and long sojourns in Paris were both characterised by the same constant need of money, at times so urgent and overwhelming that it forced him to deprive himself, if only temporarily, of some personal objects which were so dear to him that he hardly ever separated himself from them. It was thus that three cabochon emeralds which for many years the Poet had always worn on his fingers twice crossed the Channel in my custody in order to be pawned in a London house, more generous than its Parisian colleague, which hid vast wealth behind an unpretentious façade in Victoria Street. These three emeralds, of a total weight of some twenty grains, and which D'Annunzio loved with a love comparable to that of Charles the Bold for the famous diamond which he was obliged to abandon after the rout of Morat, not only constituted for him a most precious reminder of the one who had given them to him, Eleanora Duse, but always represented a sort of last hope at difficult moments.

When the question of the emeralds came on the tapis it actually meant that the Poet had reached the ultimate stage of financial depletion, for he only consented with the deepest reluctance to be parted from them.

On one occasion, under circumstances graver than any which had preceded them, he even considered the possibility of selling them outright. It was when he left for Italy in May 1915. But the critical moment was tided over by pawning, for the last time, these emeralds, which, for many years, had had numerous opportunities of entering into cordial relations with all the pawnbrokers of Europe, and after the war returned definitely into the hands of their owner, though he wore them but rarely.

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I have told in a previous chapter about D'Annunzio's predilection for posing as a talented tailor, practised cook, first-rate

jeweller, but I have not yet said how much he has always wanted to be considered as a great expert in art, and specially with regard to pictures. Ever since his childhood this has been one of his fads. There is no doubt that D'Annunzio, as much through his sure taste in every ramification of art as on account of his deep artistic culture, is an incomparable authority in matters of æsthetic appeal. His judgment is excellent when it is a question, for instance, of choosing amongst the pictures of great painters the one most representative of its creator's genius. But it is one thing to possess unerring taste and another to be an art expert. It is, nevertheless, upon this latter quality he set the major value, so that he can experience no greater mortification than to be told that he has allowed dust to be thrown in his eyes, with reference to one of the pictures he has purchased.

He possesses this weakness, which, by the way, is common to many connoisseurs, and nearly all collectors, to an extraordinary degree. When he has set the seal of his approval on a work of art there has been no example of his going back on his opinion or giving up the origin to which he has attributed it. I can cite an instance in point with regard to two pictures which he bought in Paris in 1913, on my special advice, because of their very low price.

One was a graceful canvas of the seventeenth century of the Watteau school, which, once it had entered his house and been hung in his drawing-room, became for him, as well as for the friends to whom he showed it, "the little Watteau."

The other was a small picture, also of the seventeenth-century French school, in the style of Lancret, to whom he attributed it without further ado. We have already seen in another chapter that D'Annunzio is much more severe in judging works of art which do not belong to him, and much more careful in attributing them to the brush of famous painters.

But his purchases of works of art were not limited to pictures during his exile.

All of a sudden, towards the end of 1913—I cannot say for what reason, but certainly not on religious grounds—he developed a mania for Buddhas, a mania which within a very brief period became catastrophic for his budget.

Already, in far-off times, when he lived in Rome, he had

manifested a predilection for oriental art, and especially for those objects which were passed off under the collective name of "*Japonaiseries*," of which he had also a collection of various articles.

The collection of Buddhas, started modestly with a diminutive ivory figure, in a short time swelled to such proportions that it overran the whole apartment. D'Annunzio rarely came home without a new Buddha under his arm, or, if of too cumbersome a nature, carried at a respectful distance by a shop assistant. His greed for new purchases had become such that, at a loss for an excuse in face of the depleted state of his coffers, he was driven to confiding to the servants that he bought Buddhas with an eye to business, as he had read in an ancient Indian manuscript that the interior of Buddhas sometimes served as a depository for precious stones; and to make this fable more credible, at times, when he noticed that his movements were being watched, he conscientiously tapped with a small hammer the paunch of the recently bought Buddha, putting his ear close to it as though to detect a hollow sound.

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It can be asserted that the end of D'Annunzio's sojourn in France represented the close of the era which was characterised by that youthful spirit and even more by the childish conception of life which never left him until he had reached his fiftieth birthday.

He still kept his temperament, inclined to optimistic and joyful interpretation of events, but a number of almost puerile things which up to that time had meant happiness to him ceased to divert him. Even his sense of humour took on an edge of irony which before had been alien to it.

His liking for small and innocent jokes diminished almost to vanishing point. He no longer enjoyed himself as before. It was, in fact, during the French period that, probably for the last time in his life, he put on fancy dress to take part in two masked balls; the ball at the Paris Opera House in December 1913, and a fancy dress dance given in his studio by the painter Brunelleschi.

To the ball at the Opera House he went simply in a black domino and a mask. But at Brunelleschi's he wore the costume of

a Venetian nobleman of 1700, with a three-cornered hat, a domino and a red cloak, hired from Landolff. To the Opera we went together, masked and dressed alike, arriving at midnight, when the fun was at its height.

It was the first masked ball which had taken place in Paris for fifteen years, during which time the tradition of famous functions had been in abeyance. It was thus a quite exceptional occasion.

The ball was a tremendous success. If not perhaps so wild or so rich in intrigue as its predecessors of the epoch of Gavarni and the Comtesse de Castiglione, it made up for it by unparalleled pomp. All the loveliest women of Paris were present, and the costumes reached the very summit of elegance and daring.

D'Annunzio's enjoyment in visiting the various boxes, followed by myself, and in "intriguing" the numerous ladies of his acquaintance was boundless; and his pleasure was increased by his conviction that the women who showed themselves so gracious and responsive did so under the sway of his conversation. My conviction, on the contrary, was that the greater part of the women recognised him at once, in spite of his mask, by his highly individual accent, and behaved accordingly as ladies would who were flattered by the company of the idol of the day. But, of course, I kept this explanation to myself. Towards two in the morning he discovered a lady who had, indeed, unmasked the space between her eyes to the tip of her nose, but very little else (her so-called Bacchante costume consisting of a leopard skin and a string of pearls worth about two million). He attached himself to this beautiful stranger and remained with her for the rest of the evening.

I am unable to relate what took place between him and the leopard skin, because not only was I deprived of the pleasure of his company that evening, but when he returned to the hotel about nine o'clock the next day he refused all information with regard to the developments between him and the beautiful mask. They could hardly have lacked originality, however, since his costume, his hat, and his cloak were literally covered by enormous cobwebs.

When I drew his attention to this unusual circumstance, he smiled inscrutably but made no comment.

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At the second ball D'Annunzio and I were accompanied by two young Russian friends. Towards eleven at night we left the house in the Rue de Bassano, which D'Annunzio inhabited at that time, all four dressed in costumes chosen by Brunelleschi. As the painter lived at Montparnasse we expected to arrive there about eleven-thirty, instead of which we got there at half-past two. What happened? On our way we stopped for a quick cocktail at the popular bar of the Elysée Palace, at the corner of the Champs-Élysées and the Rue de Bassano. At the entrance I was approached by an old gentleman, an habitué of this fashionable bar, who no sooner learnt that my companion was Gabriele D'Annunzio than he asked to be presented to him. This man was Balthazzi.

To the present generation, I know, the name means little or nothing. "Who was Balthazzi?" they ask.

Yet the man was interesting from at least two points of view. In the first place this rich Hungarian, whose former vast wealth remains no more than a memory, had seen his racing colours secure for him a very noteworthy "double"—the Epsom Derby and the Paris Grand Prix; and secondly, a fact of even greater interest resides in the fact that he was uncle to Maria Veczera, the friend of Archduke Rudolph and the heroine of the tragic night at Mayerling, and he was a guest at the famous last supper at the hunting-lodge.

Balthazzi knew all the great of the earth, for all had, on one occasion at least, sat at his table. Yet, in spite of the most pressing and importunate requests, he had never allowed a single word to escape him with regard to the tragedy at Mayerling, although it was known to him in its most intimate details.

D'Annunzio, in whose ear I whispered a few explanatory words, took quick advantage of the occasion and insistently begged Balthazzi to reveal the truth to him.

The Hungarian, as always heretofore, fenced before surrendering, but suddenly he said to him in a confidential voice which did not escape us: "I have revealed the truth to no one, but as you are Gabriele D'Annunzio, I will tell it to you." They retired to a corner, and for more than one and a half hours old Balthazzi spoke in whispers to D'Annunzio.

Interested to the highest degree, the Poet drank in his words, interrupting only to ask him to elucidate some particular point. When he rose to depart, Gabriele D'Annunzio knew the truth about the tragedy of Mayerling. It must have proved of the greatest interest to the Poet, because all that night, in spite of the dancing, the champagne, and the beautiful ladies present, he remained absorbed in his thoughts. No one of us dared question him, not even our two youthful companions, but they were Russians, and of Russians you can expect anything, even a total absence of curiosity. On the following day I asked him point blank, "Will you write some day what you heard yesterday from Balthazzi?" "No," he answered, "*Rudolph and Veczera have written their tragedy in blood; there is no reason why I should spoil it with ink.*" From that day I have never heard D'Annunzio refer to this experience.

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Fortunately it is not only for its amorous adventures, and for its licit and illicit diversions, that the Poet's exile in France is remarkable.

This state of affairs particularly applied to the more lengthy periods of his sojourn in Paris, encouraged by his lack of any fixed abode in the great capital. During the last months and the rest of the time, he gravitated between furnished apartments and hotel rooms. For this reason he was nearly always deprived of that solitude, isolation and repose which were indispensable to his creative work and as a result little came from his pen during that period.

By way of compensation, the three and a half years which he spent beside the ocean witnessed the creation of that wonderful cycle of work which began with the *Canzoni della Gesta d'Oltremare*, and was rounded off with the stupendous *Oration of Quarto*, the literary perfection of which soars above the powerful patriotic inspiration that pervades the whole.

What I wish to establish is that, even during this long period of the Poet's life, in the midst of the glare of a great intellectual fire, there also flickered small fitful flames of doubtful origin whose poisonous fumes sometimes imperilled the glorious expansion of his genius. To hide this fact would certainly have

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detracted from our comprehension of the spirit, the temperament and the soul of the Poet, who, at times, seemed to take delight seeking the depths, only to rise again more resplendent to indreamed-of heights, thus justifying the ancient saying, "*Ex putredine vita.*"

CHAPTER XI

MANIAS, WHIMS AND SUPERSTITIONS

D'Annunzio emulates Bonaparte—The Poet as a "baby-eater!"—The sacred ear of the Poet—A theatre at a thousand dollars a seat—D'Annunzio's "suicide"—The mysterious journey beyond the red sea-weeds—D'Annunzio's mottoes—D'Annunzio's typographic mania—His messengers—The art of making up parcels—The Ulysses cocktail—A Milanese soothsayer—The mysterious spell—The disquieting vision—"That rascal Wilson!"—The power of No. 7—D'Annunzio is afraid of evoking Judas—A nun's prophecies—"Apollo's friend"—D'Annunzio, the gambler—The Poet at the monastery of Monte Cassino.

I REMEMBER reading in some book by Masson or by Ludwig that Napoleon—during his Italian campaign, and more particularly when staying at Milan—amused himself by terrifying the lovely ladies who courted him in the Palazzo Serbelloni by stories of his amazing adventures with Corsican brigands, which, in reality, were but a product of his inexhaustible imagination.

D'Annunzio has acted all his life in the same way.

It is not so much that he lies as that he invents, which is rather different. Are we to accuse Chateaubriand of lying when, with lavish detail, he describes countries wherein he had never set foot?

The fact that D'Annunzio is a great inventor in the strictly etymological sense of the word should astonish no one. His brain is at boiling-point from morning till night, and when he cannot sleep, from night till morning. He is constantly inventing plots for novels, dramas, and short stories.

He has devised the decorations for all his apartments, and when he has had nothing better to do he has invented with a prodigal nimbleness of mind and fecundity a myriad of imaginary incidents and things which, though unreal and the product of his genius, have served for his own delectation, as well as for that of his listeners, admirers and friends. These inventions, which may be likened to the morsels left over from a great banquet, are sufficiently numerous to fill volumes.

They have spurted from his lips in a continuous stream, especially when he has been in a good temper; and when his listeners have been to his taste his fancies have run riot and mingled magically like kaleidoscopic visions.

His listeners at their first encounter with him have been spell-bound, some of his phantasies being both horrible and incredible. Uncertain whether to believe them or to smile at them, they have drunk in the words of the Poet with the anticipatory joy of being able to repeat them in their turn a few hours later. Sometimes, tickled rather by the comical expression of his listeners than by the humour of his own tale, D'Annunzio burst into laughter, leaving everyone at a loss for the reason of his mirth.

At times the fount of his invention has gushed forth without the slightest reference to reality; sometimes it has taken as a basis some actual fact, some experience of his own, which his imagination proceeded to embellish and magnify out of all proportion.

Nine times out of ten the legends, I mean the lesser ones, which have accompanied him through life, and which have so vexed him, have been due to his own inventiveness. Human stupidity, multiplied a hundredfold in the presence of genius, is such that even the most normal individuals have been ready to accept at their face value the most extravagant vagaries, as long as they have emanated from D'Annunzio.

I was once present at a Parisian dinner given in honour of D'Annunzio, during which, in the midst of some prosaic talk about the tenderness of cooked meat, the Poet suddenly observed, in an intentionally hesitating manner, that the flesh of new-born babies very much resembled lamb. I noticed at once that some of the guests—some of the women especially—gave definite sign of perturbation on hearing this apparent confession of cannibalism drop from D'Annunzio's lips, the more so as he emphasised it with a slightly embarrassed smile, as though remorseful at having so lightly imparted such secret information.

"But you frighten us, *Maitre*," said an old lady with sunken eyes already blurred with tears; "it simply can't be true! Where did this horrible thing happen to you?"

"*In Africa*," said D'Annunzio with a vague gesture and drooping head, "*a very long time ago.*"

Many, of course, began to laugh, but a vague impression of discomfort remained. Later on I heard a fragment of conversation between two guests, one of whom was the ancient lady mentioned before.

"And what do you think of his humbug about his eating children?"

"Well, you know, my dear," answered the old lady, "you never can tell with these great artists. They are so degenerate sometimes."

D'Annunzio's exceptional imagination does not even pause before the heroic aspect of things that concerned him personally. He had to invent; he cannot help it.

Speaking of inventions of a lighter nature, I should like to describe D'Annunzio's meeting at the Vittoriale with two American journalists.

Everybody knows what an American journalist stands for to a man of Latin race: a veritable Philistine, possessed of a frantic desire to collect sensational and unpublished news in order to cable it to his paper.

Imagine what a boon such a visit meant to an "Inventor" of D'Annunzio's type! The mere presence of the two pressmen at the Vittoriale constituted an irresistible temptation to bring out his most staggering fabrications.

After having already primed them sufficiently with stories of every kind while walking through the gardens, he was suddenly visited by an exhilarating inspiration.

"*Do you know that I am building a large subterranean theatre in the Vittoriale?*" Instantaneous amazement and interest were registered on the faces of the two journalists, whose eyes were glittering behind their horn-rimmed owl-like spectacles and whose fingers were already fumbling in their pockets for the inevitable note-books.

"*Certainly,*" continued D'Annunzio, "*a theatre with a hundred seats—at a thousand dollars each,*" he added with a smile, "*in which all my works will be presented, including a new one under the title 'Brother Sun.' I myself shall interpret the rôle of St. Francis.*"

Nevertheless, this time when he saw them going D'Annunzio felt a twinge of fright. "*Perhaps,*" he said, "*I laid it on a bit too*

thick. Let us hope that, however idiotic they may be, they did not believe me."

A month later he was obliged to renounce this pious hope. He received extracts from American papers in which the astounding news about the theatre was reported in all its details, and as if it were the most natural thing in the world. D'Annunzio merely smiled.

For longer than I can remember he has never troubled to deny any reports, not even those which, at successive intervals, have announced his demise, and the less so as those obituary notices have been only too often just reproductions of yarns circulated by himself.

At the time when he lived at the Versiliana he informed his numerous friends and acquaintances that he would die on the 17th April of that year, 1908, adding that the event was inevitable. It had been predicted to him by a fortune-teller in Florence who, some years earlier, had made a similar prediction to Count Costa Reghini, which prophecy had unfortunately come true.

On the morning of the 17th April D'Annunzio left his house on horseback, choosing a rather vicious horse Undulna, which had played him up badly once before. He rode to the marble quarries, and having got there, made his horse jump over all the marble blocks which had previously frightened the animal. Undulna cleared them and remained perfectly calm.

Returning from his excursion by a different route, the rider fell in with a country fair, complete with orchestra, jousts, wild animals, and shooting galleries. D'Annunzio made his horse walk between the booths, but in spite of the infernal music, the blaring of the bands, and the howls of the animals, Undulna did not blink an eyelid. After that D'Annunzio decided to go home, and having dined, shut himself up in his bedroom, placed his revolver on the table, and began to brood; but no impulse came to him to seize the weapon and put an end to his life.

"I never felt less like suicide than I did then," he used to say when recalling this incident. When midnight struck, his exhaustion reconciled him to his fate and he went quietly to bed.

This is not the only time that he has diverted himself by

spreading such morbid prophecies. Once, while he was recovering from an injury to his eye caused in a snowball fight with the beautiful granddaughter of Lady Hamilton, he solemnly declared that he knew he was to die between 1905 and 1906.

And another time he told everyone that Madame de Thèbes had predicted his death for the 17th July, 1910. The habit of indulging in this macabre humour is an old one with him, for, when giving his photo to a friend at the early age of eighteen, he wrote under the signature. "*Born on the 12th March, 1863, at Pescara—died on the 15th June, 1889, in Rome.*"

He also wrote about himself later, referring to another epoch of his youth: "*At that time*" (speaking of his meeting with Carducci) "*I felt a clear premonition that I would leave this world before my twenty-first birthday, But like Keats, in the hemistich, sharp as a cry of pain, which appears on the frontispiece of the Canto Nuovo, after that, being like most men an adaptable animal, I resigned myself to another nine years beyond my allotted span.*"

In Rome, in 1909, meeting Doctor Barth, the correspondent of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, he said to him: "*I shall die on the 17th July next. Three old witches have independently fixed upon this date for the day of my death.*"

In April, 1930, writing to the members of the Boat Club of Santa Margherita Ligure, he said to them: "*Your sea will probably be my tomb. I desire that my body should be committed to the deep during a night of May. Thus I shall begin the most mysterious journey of all beyond the red sea-weeds. You will all be invited to witness my strange departure.*"

In 1929, at the Vittoriale, he had assured the French writer, Henry Bordeaux, who visited him there, that his body was destined to disappear during a new war, either on sea or in air. "*My death can only be a violent one.*"

Another version was given by him to the actor, Le Bargy, who wrote with regard to this: "D'Annunzio is really an extraordinary man, but up till now I did not know how extraordinary he is. When I went to visit him at the Castle of Breda he confessed to me that he would rather kill himself than face a mediocre existence. I laughed and asked him whether he was joking. The Poet confided to me that he would be dead before the year was out. He added that he had also chosen the mode of his death,

and that it would cause general comment, and he added: *'No single part of me will survive. My substance will be volatilised into infinitesimal molecules.'*

"But Monsieur Le Bargy has given a wrong impression of my meaning by alluding to a process which he calls the evaporation of a gaseous element," D'Annunzio remarked later on in the course of a gay repast at his house, *"What I did say was that having up to now led an exceptional existence, I would rather kill myself than be compelled to live in a mediocre fashion; but that my death must be as violent as my whole life had been."*

Sometimes, also, the D'Annunzian inventions are not personal at all, but take the form of good-humoured jokes which hurt no one, but which have such an apparent foundation of truth and are affirmed with such conviction that, although his listeners laugh at them, they swallow them whole. Thus, when D'Annunzio showed his visitors the "Bridge of Supplications," he explained that anyone who crossed it for the first time had only to pay toll of a penny and beg for a definite favour, to have it granted within a short time by Providence.

The Poet was not content with these assertions, but supported them with concrete instances of his experiences. *"Some time ago,"* he said, *"a lady wrote to me sending me a penny, and asking me to take the necessary steps to enable her to recapture the love of a man who had abandoned her. I did all that she requested, and a few months afterwards she wrote to tell me that her lover had come back to her, adding piteously that he was giving her an awful time. As you see,"* D'Annunzio gloomily concluded, *"it is impossible to satisfy women."*

With D'Annunzio no one can tell where truth ends and fiction begins, for he is incredibly skilful in weaving his stories. One day at Fiume my friend and comrade, Captain Eugenio Coselschi, owing to one of those Court intrigues which did not even spare the Court of Fiume, had momentarily fallen into disgrace, and was obliged to tender his resignation from the post of General Secretary to the Fiume Government.

He took up his quarters at the Hôtel Europa like any mere mortal, hoping that happier times would soon dawn for him.

But it so happened that the mother and father of the Captain chose this very moment to visit him in Fiume; they were both

close friends of D'Annunzio, and their son could not bring himself to cause them distress by disclosing to them his temporary fall from grace.

D'Annunzio immediately invited them to an intimate luncheon party at the Government Palace, and also invited the Captain and myself. Captain Coselschi begged the *Comandante*, through me, to have the kindness to give his parents the impression that his suspension, which was so widely known that they could not fail to hear of it, was only due to the fact that he was about to be entrusted with a secret, and even more important, mission.

D'Annunzio, who is extremely kind-hearted, acceded to this request and promised to play his part in the comedy.

During the cordial gathering that followed he carried the comedy off in so masterly a fashion, inventing such details for the faked appointment and surrounding it with such mystery, that not only were the parents filled with joy and pride on their son's account, but even the Captain himself, leaving the Palace with me, said in a jubilant voice, "But surely *you* know where he wants to send me?" And as I smiled in ironic amazement, he added, "No, it is impossible that he should be capable of dissembling to such a degree! I assure you that he has some idea at the back of his mind."

It seems to me that this instance of D'Annunzio's inventive faculty is truly typical of the man.

His imagination, especially when he is in a good humour, is inexhaustible. One day the conversation turned upon perfumes, of which he is a lover and a connoisseur. He told us that, returning from a trip to the shores of the Tyrrhenian Sea, he brought with him an essence of roses so highly concentrated that, one drop of it having been spilt on the waves, the whole of the Tyrrhenian Sea was perfumed for over seven months. "*Poesy is reality, dear Nerina,*" he concluded, looking at my daughter, who was smiling incredulously.

At other times he recounted the story of a very secret visit made in the company of Henry de Régnier to a Chinese restaurant in Paris, where he found that a magic tea was being served. This tea had the power of stimulating a person's growth so rapidly that shortly his head touched the ceiling, and he was obliged to disburse a large sum of money in order to regain his

normal proportions and be able to leave the place.

He also once told his Legionaries in Fiume that in the course of his life he had sometimes been subjected to a phenomenon of levitation, so that he was "*immediately lifted up to the ceiling,*" but the Legionaries, confronted by this affirmation, emanating though it did from their *Comandante*, burst into such uproarious and irresistible laughter that he himself was obliged to join in their hilarity.

I could recount dozens of these D'Annunzian inventions, but most of them would lose their savour if expressed in the dry commonplace tone of my narrative. When the poet, author and actor, rolled into one, relates these stories himself, not only do they acquire the delicious flavour of a popular legend, but the words he uses, the richness of imagery, the mimicry which accompanies them, lend almost verisimilitude to his most astounding and incredible fairy tales.

While D'Annunzio's inventions are unexpected and the result of improvisation, independent alike of law and of regulations, his idiosyncrasies, large or small, have a stable character, with roots that can be traced to the most remote years of his adolescence; they are neither transitory nor determined by the conditions of his life. The sentence "*from such a time this eccentricity became noticeable in him*" could never be applied to D'Annunzio, because eccentricities have accompanied him through life from the day of his birth.

I have mentioned in another chapter his obsession for cleanliness which manifests itself in an uncontrollable aversion to anything not destined for his own exclusive use, whether glass, cutlery, linen or even a woman's mouth (this last seems rather an exaggerated pretension); and I have also referred to his penchant for renaming the women he loved when I expatiated upon the Poet's amorous rites. I come now to his fondness for mottoes.

I believe that no artist, no man in the world, has ever adopted and created, for himself and for others, a greater number of mottoes and devices in Italian, Latin, French and Greek. The motto is an integral part of every creative work and of every gesture of D'Annunzio, whether it consists of conquering a city or of presenting a gift, however small or insignificant.

Mottoes consecrate, complete and perfect every phase of

D'Annunzio's life, adorn and ennoble any object he possesses, and, since they change according to his momentary desires and aspirations, they are as innumerable as the moods and the events in the life of a man of his nature.

Therefore, if the artist or the great man of any century can generally be characterised by one, two, or at the most three mottoes, D'Annunzio, for his part, is not content with less than fifty.

His faculty for producing them is as inexhaustible as his ability for discovering them in obscure sources and adapting them immediately to his own use. In this domain he also shows himself an inspired creator, so much so that I have hesitated to include this quality among his eccentricities, as it is worthy of being classified with those others which place their imprint on his literary work. There is, in fact, no reason why a verse should be superior to a motto, provided both are created by D'Annunzio.

D'Annunzio gives preference to certain mottoes which have lasted for years and occupied a post of honour on his writing-paper and on an infinite number of his personal belongings. First of all, by right of seniority and duration, is the famous "*Lest we sleep*," which literally held sway over his life and habitations for over ten years.

This motto was not invented by the Poet. It was one belonging to the Tuscan family and the Marquises of Bartolini-Salimbeni. It was engraved on the Villa Capponcina, which had passed to them after originally belonging to the Capponi, who ceded it to the Marquis Viviani della Robbia, from whom D'Annunzio in turn rented it towards 1900.

The sense of this motto, as of many other heraldic mottoes, is obscure. Legend attributes it to the fact that in 1300 an ancestor of the Bartolini-Salimbeni acquired great riches through having risen early in the morning and being accordingly able to reach the market-place in advance of the others.

The motto can be interpreted symbolically as a rule of life if the verb "to sleep" is taken in the sense which it had in the thirteenth century, which is, "to be forgotten." In that case it would imply a stimulus to activity and work, which, translated into simple language, would signify, "Work if you do not wish your name to be forgotten."

By the way, this interpretation of mine is confirmed by D'Annunzio's own statement, thirty-five years after having adopted it: "*When I wished to assume a device worthy of my obedience I hesitated between the words 'Lest we sleep' and 'Lest we die,' surrounded by a laurel wreath; after that I desired to have them both engraved on the sides of that solitary sepulchre which my friends and followers have promised to erect at the mouth of my native river.*"

Be that as it may, this motto was evidently intended as a call to action. For this reason it took the fancy of D'Annunzio, who adopted it on the spot; the more so as during the whole period of the Capponcina, like Saint Simon and Proust, he accomplished all his literary work at night, and this motto served as a contrast to that playful one also used continually by him, "*Urge to work, jump on my back.*"

The former characterises the most splendid period of his inspired creation. Two other mottoes are rather favourites: "*I dare, but I do not plunder: I have what I give,*" and "*Sufficit animus: Semper adamas.*" While the first is a battle-cry which contains a challenge flung from Fiume into the face of the world by D'Annunzio, who openly defied treacherous Europe which was laying snares for his feet and trying to enmesh him in intrigue, the second has, in my opinion, the dolorous intonation of self-withdrawal into the fastness of the soul—nay, more, melancholy renunciation. With this second motto the Poet seemed desirous of proclaiming one of the great truths of his life: "I have given to all and sundry so much of myself, of my intelligence and kindness, of my strength, my activity, and of my money, that I have the right to keep what I possess."

This, in fact, has become D'Annunzio's favourite motto since he has resided on the Lago di Garda, a period which marks the beginning of the descending parabola of the man and the artist; the superb decline which, like the sunset of a marvellously fine day, is shot here and there by the dazzling light of the last rays of the sun.

Lastly, but not chronologically, I recall another motto, "*Me ne frego*" ("I do not care"). This motto has not a warlike origin, although it became the historic cry of the *Arditi*, later adopted by the Legionaries of Fiume. D'Annunzio had already used it in

France in 1914, when no one was yet thinking of war.

He even had it engraved on his writing-paper, so that often some of his French friends, placing me in a most embarrassing position, asked me to explain its significance, which, naturally, I kept to myself.

When applied to his amorous life, this motto represented for D'Annunzio a programme which throughout his exile he rarely failed to fulfil.

Another motto to which he gave preference for the same reason was, "*Who shall keep me tied?*" "*Quis contra nos*" is inscribed on the flag of the Regency of the Carnaro, and it was also engraved on his writing-paper.

It must, however, be noted that D'Annunzio has never made use of the motto, "*Forse che si, forse che no,*" which rather corresponded to his temperament, always susceptible to change.

The motto which he chose for his princely coat of arms was, "*Immotus nec iners.*" This perfectly applies to the life which he leads at Garda, which can be defined paradoxically as an epoch of fertile intellectual idleness.

* * * * *

As an author, D'Annunzio is afflicted by another peculiarity, shared by many of his colleagues, by those, at least, of times subsequent to the invention of Gutenberg, that is, the *typographic mania*.

When delivering one of his manuscripts to an editor or to a publisher, D'Annunzio is terrified by the idea of what may happen to his prose in a *typographic sense*.

The transposition of a comma, the mistaken placing of a paragraph, the possible modification of an article, throws him into an indescribable paroxysm of rage. He would like to go on correcting the proofs over and over again until cramp intervenes; a typographical error can make him suffer as though it were a dagger thrust.

In 1905, when I was his publisher, he wrote to me: "*I implore you to respond to my goodwill with the most lynx-eyed vigilance.*" And another time he wrote: "*With my heart a-tremble I foresee that it will be impossible for me to correct the proofs. I beg of you to act with the most scrupulous diligence. The manuscript is extremely*

clear; it is sufficient to follow it word by word, paragraph by paragraph, comma by comma. If I find a single error, I shall not send the second part. If my prose has not suffered unmerited outrages, I shall bring it myself to Milan."

Another time he wrote: "I repeat to you that I wish the preface to the *Life* to be printed at once. If I find a single mistake, I shall drop everything. May your damned hurry not make me a victim of your clumsy printers! . . . Instead of lamenting, your compositor should take better care over his setting. . . . The text is full of blunders. . . . You will not expect me, I hope, to correct dozens of volumes! Here is a relentless rule for your guidance: I shall never allow my words to be printed without my having corrected the proofs in person . . . in the fragment sent to me the rhythmic coherence has been deplorably marred by four wrongly inserted paragraphs. What misplaced confidence! Be indulgent to my mania, and send me the proofs . . ."

And when, being tired of his unceasing stipulations, I once disobeyed his orders and printed a book, he wired: "I deplore your act of editorial despotism. I have been used for many years to give my permission for the 'imprimatur.'"

This took place in 1905. Seventeen years later—in 1922—he wrote again, this time regarding his publisher, Treves:

"My eyes are aching after revising the proofs which Treves has sent to me bristling with errors, instead of submitting them first to the printer's reader."

His morbid preoccupation did not diminish with regard to his publications in French. "It is necessary that you should see Calmann," he wrote to me in 1913, "and you must settle this business. You will tell him that I am sorry not to have received so far the proofs of the *Poésie*; that it is necessary that I should see them; and that I shall not permit their publication without my perusing them first."

This feeling of anxiety is common to many writers, and also to novices who imagine that their honour and the whole of their artistic career are jeopardized if the unfortunate compositor has misplaced a word, whilst in practice the reader is quite capable of mental readjustments without any of the catastrophic consequences imagined by the author. But D'Annunzio, as we have seen, succumbs to these apprehensions to a most unusual

degree, though the obsession is much less justifiable in his case. On the one hand, his fame is too solidly established to be compromised by printer's errors, and on the other, mistakes have always been extremely rare, since all, from the editor to the boy who swept the composing-room, bent every ounce of their energy to satisfy one who was the literary glory of the firm. A little later this madness was extended by D'Annunzio to include typing. When, during our stay in France, he gave me his manuscripts to type he was greatly taken up with this question, and every day confused me with a medley of instructions. When sending me the *Pisanella* manuscript, he wrote: "*Will you see that the copy is absolutely correct, for errors in this sort of writing are atrocious! Besides, the manuscript is very clear, even regarding the name. Courage, brother, will see you in a few days. Your Gabriele.*"

Another little peculiarity of D'Annunzio, but this time a very innocent one, concerns the post.

If by chance he sees someone drop a letter into a post-box, his face assumes an expression of amazed compassion, as though witnessing some poor imbecile putting his will into a bottle and trusting it to the waves. I do not exaggerate by any means.

"Is it possible," he seems to say, "that such deluded people still exist?"

Actually, D'Annunzio never recognises anything but a registered letter as a means of correspondence. For many years he also made use of the "messenger," that is, of an individual who enjoyed his absolute confidence and placed his letters directly in the hands of the addressee.

This system, which was in vogue at the time of the Romans, alone gave him perfect satisfaction, as he considered any other means of conveyance as hazardous and uncertain. For D'Annunzio the ideal procedure would have been for his correspondents to come to him in person and place the letter in his own hands, but since this was impossible, he had to resign himself to other devices. The letters (another small oddity of D'Annunzio) were not only written on one side only of large-sized foolscap parchment, but their envelopes were lavishly sealed. They bore the appearance of Government papers rather than that of ordinary letters. The contents as well as the address

were written entirely in D'Annunzio's hand, and he often used two inks of a different colour. The black was reserved for the name and address, the red for the directions: "Urgent," "Very urgent," "Personal," and so forth.

D'Annunzio is so precise and painstaking that he never makes the slips which most people make who write with inks of two colours; he never gets his pens mixed or dips them into the wrong inkwell. He is so careful, too, in affixing his seals that he used jestingly to boast he was the only man in the world who had the necessary skill to make up a parcel or close an envelope properly.

One day at Arcachon, in 1915, he sent me this note:

"Try to perfect yourself in the hermetic art of sealing, more noble than any other."

And sending various gifts to be sold for charity to Emma Grammatica, in 1922, he wrote to her: *"I have worked with puerile diligence at wrapping up the gifts and adding a description of each."*

Among other small D'Annunzian idiosyncrasies there is also his inclination to consider himself as a great prophet, a great ladies' tailor, a great cook and a great "barman."

He offered to the French academician, Henry Bordeaux, who visited him at the Vittoriale, some cocktails which had been prepared according to a formula of his own. Henry Bordeaux writes of this as follows: "I have rediscovered"—so he assured me—"the receipt of the beverage given by Hermes to Ulysses in order to preserve him from the wiles of Circe. It is an excellent, stimulating, salubrious tonic and a giver of joy."

* * * * *

According to his arbitrary version, which has no connection with reality, the Vittoriale, apart from being the temple of Victory, is also supposed to represent a sort of Academy of Arts and Crafts personally directed by him under the jocular pseudonyms of "Maestro Paragon Coppella" (as goldsmith) and of "Maestro Modino delle Cianfrusaglie" (as ladies' tailor). From this school there are to emerge (always according to his personal conception) artistic jewels, materials, chased bindings, coloured glass, "gowns and coats," and other objects which he

presents willingly to the numerous pilgrims of both sexes, but particularly the feminine ones, who come to visit him at the Vittoriale. It is an innocent whim to pretend to be a great cook and to have invented dishes that can be ordered in any respectable restaurant. The truth (and I can vouch for it, because I lived with D'Annunzio for nearly thirty years) is that D'Annunzio as a cook would hardly be equal to preparing two boiled eggs. Another one of his crazes consists of pretending to be totally unaware of the hour, the day, the month, or the year in which he is living. Generally speaking, he finds that time flies too quickly, but I have also heard him complain of its slow passing, which he yet finds too swift for the many projects he has in view.

I now come to the subject of his superstitions, and I wish to make it clear that they are few and comparatively uncertain. By "uncertain" I mean that, while attaching a certain importance to them, D'Annunzio can rarely be induced to modify an alluring project merely because some superstition forbids him to carry it out. On the other hand, he finds superstition useful when he wishes to avoid something which bores him. Here is an example: In August 1921, the Poet lunched with Mascagni in the latter's villa at Milan. After the meal D'Annunzio consulted the Milanese sibyl whom Mascagni's wife, Donna Lina, had bidden to her house. The soothsayer, who predicted the future by the Chaldean system of immersing the white of an egg in water, revealed to D'Annunzio that the following September would be for him an extraordinarily dangerous month, especially if he travelled.

He took immediate advantage of this prediction to give up a journey which he had planned to make to Ravenna on the 12th of September to attend a commemoration, although he had promised to be present and thousands of people were to meet him there.

D'Annunzio has always carried in his pocket dice enclosed in a small golden box. He consults them, sometimes seriously and sometimes for fun, but in the latter case he only accepts their dictum if it coincides with his wishes or if the decision does not greatly matter one way or the other. He left these dice behind him in Venice, and was so distressed about it that

when the chambermaid found them and sent them on, he wrote to me at once from Gardone: "*We are all right. My dear old dice-box has turned up.*"

In 1917, having been unable to redeem his two rings which were in pawn in London and which he desired me to send to him at once in Venice, I wrote telling him that he must possess his soul in patience a little longer. He wired to me: "*Disappointed about rings: have superstitious reasons for wishing for their return. It would have been easy to send somebody to fetch them. Rest is satisfactory. Thank you. Au revoir.*"

He believed in spell-binders, so that one day in March 1913, he wrote to me in Paris from Arcachon: "*For some time I have been under the influence of some anonymous spell-binder of the Landes. In locking up an obstreperous dog in the kennels I have squashed the forefinger of my right hand terribly. Naturally I have been unable to write during the day. I am moving my pen now with this finger held up, but I could not do so for long. Besides, when we meet you will see that the nail is black. I hope I shall not lose it. In the meantime Ricordi is sending me impatient telegrams, but I cannot tell him about this idiotic and deplorable adventure. Go to him at once and tell him that I am extremely mortified at having been so remiss, but that I am being dogged by ill-luck.*"

He likewise believed that certain people brought him good fortune. On the eve of the first performance in Paris of one of his tragedies, he wired to Count Emanuele Castelbarco, one of his intimate friends: "*I take the opportunity of reminding you that your presence has always been of good omen to me. I expect you, therefore, without fail at the dress-rehearsal of Caprifoglio on Thursday. My respects to the indulgent Countess.*"

I also wish to allude to another superstition of D'Annunzio (if it can so be called without lack of reverence) rooted in the filial love which he felt and expressed for his mother while she was alive, and in the veneration in which he held her memory after her death.

A short time before D'Annunzio fell from a window of the Vittoriale in August 1922—an accident which placed his life in serious peril—a photographer had taken a picture of him leaning over his writing desk.

Looking at this photograph some time after he had escaped this danger, D'Annunzio suddenly noticed a curious detail which he had overlooked in the beginning, namely, the visible outline of a hand supporting his face whilst he was bending over his papers. In this outline D'Annunzio fancied that he recognised his mother's hand, with a ring which she usually wore.

This image is usually identifiable by anyone who looks intently at the photograph, and from that day it was looked upon as the symbol of the protection she still exercised over him.

In writing a dedication to my mother across this photograph, he laid particular stress on this inexplicable phenomenon: "*To Tom's Mamma, this mysterious image.—Gabriele D'Annunzio.*"

He believes in premonitions and is convinced that he possesses prophetic gifts. I cannot tell how far this was true, but facts have certainly borne it out on many occasions.

In 1888 he published a pamphlet entitled *The Italian Navy*, in which, speaking of the task which in a future war would be entrusted to torpedo-boat destroyers, he said: "*They will thus approach the great enemy fleet under the unceasing thunder of guns capable of firing more than 600 rounds per minute, with an incredible sureness of aim. They will approach to within 400 metres; at less than 400 if possible they will release the first torpedo, then the second. And no human joy will equal theirs if they are able to see the monstrous enemy Dreadnought heel over, pointing the useless mouths of its cannons heavenwards, rapidly disappearing with its turrets and batteries into a bottomless abyss.*"

These words must be recognised as truly prophetic, even if one has a sceptical mind, because they described thirty years in advance, in its most minute particulars, the sinking of the Austrian cruiser *Viribus Unitis* in the Adriatic by the *Mas* under Comandante Rizzo.

At Fiume one day, in the company of myself and others, D'Annunzio uttered these words, whose sense at that moment seemed obscure to me: "*Do not give another thought to the hostility of that rascal Wilson. I dreamed last night that he was devouring his own brain.*"

At that moment Wilson was in perfect health and nobody could have foreseen his tragic end.

He even believes in the existence in his habitations of a small

genius or little devil—"a sprite of extravagance," as he calls him, "*whose name is 'Mazzamoriello.' An innocuous being who often diverts himself by hiding the most indispensable objects, he has his hiding place in a coal-cellar in my home, and from my infancy he has kept watch over me.*"

He is so convinced of this that he rarely spends more than two minutes in looking for a thing which he cannot find, "*because I am sure that he will put it back again when it suits him.*" He places a blind faith in the magic power of given numbers. His favourite is 11. Next to it is 9, and next to that again is 7, both of which are specially fancied by him with regard to his literary work. Next come 21 and 27 (multiples of 7 and 9).

He often quotes superstitiously those he calls the "27 sevens." They were the 7 gifts of the Holy Ghost, the 7 hills of Rome, the 7 wise men, the 7 heavens, the 7 planets, the 7 stars, the 7 wonders, the 7 beauties, the 7 Sacraments, the 7 sins, the 7 Sorrows, the 7 churches, the 7 candelabra, the 7 Wounds, the 7 spirits, the 7 eyes, the 7 gates of Thebes, the 7 colours, the 7 pleiads, the 7 virtues, the 7 arts, and the 7 books of Lauds.

He detests even numbers, and he affirmed in 1921 that the 27th Italian legislature would be the best because "*7 plus 2 equals 9, 9 equals 3 multiplied by 3.*"

One day he said jocosely to one of his friends: "*My dogs are reduced to the number of 7 and my horses to 3; I myself have lost 7 kilos.*"

In 1916, after having been awarded his second silver medal, he wrote to me: "*It is probable, by the way, that I shall soon gain the third metal, as a homage, whether dead or alive, to my profound trinitarian feeling.*"

He said one day to Renato Brozzi, a favourite silversmith, who executed to his entire satisfaction the cups and shields which he presented for air races and sporting events: "*Please decorate for me eleven plates, each bearing the Franciscan girdle. You will place between the knots the mottoes which I shall give you, and you will ornament them according to your taste. There must be eleven—not twelve.*"

Which tends to prove that D'Annunzio does not wish to evoke the presence of Judas when he is at table.

From an astrological point of view he considers himself

protected by the star Altair. He hates the month of February, because it is generally a time of rain and mists, and because he says "*Fogs oppress the intellect.*"

He considers the emerald as the precious stone most favourable to him. He once commissioned me to buy a ring for him and present it to my wife on the occasion of our wedding; learning that I had bought an emerald, he wrote: "*I am glad that you should have given an emerald to Bianca in my name. It is 'my' stone.*"

He also willingly places faith in the predictions of chiromancers, graphologists, and, above all, in prophecies; and although he does not believe in them blindly, he takes great pleasure in this sort of pseudo-science, just as he has a passion for astrology and all occult sciences, ancient and modern. Someone tells the story of a French witch who one day predicted to him: "You shall be King." I do not attach much belief to this anecdote, above all because it was only revealed after Fiume (*et pour cause!*). Besides, I have never heard D'Annunzio refer to it.

Whilst we were together at Lucerne he was fated to experience his greatest graphological disillusionment. He asked me to submit a page of his own writing to a graphologist who lived at the Hôtel Schweitzerhof, leaving him in ignorance as to the identity of the author. The expert subjected the manuscript to a lengthy examination and then pronounced his verdict. "A megalomaniac, without any natural ability!" D'Annunzio greatly relished this definition, and broadcast it amongst all his friends.

In the period preceding the war he often frequented the house of the Marchioness de C., who at that time cultivated occult sciences with such assiduity and passion that she kept prophets and magicians in her own house for months and sometimes for years, modelling herself on the princes of the Renaissance, who had always astrologers and magicians in their train.

At that time D'Annunzio totally immersed himself in the practice of white and black magic, and enjoyed himself to his heart's content.

In Paris, in 1913, he was given the opportunity of meeting a clairvoyante who lived in *La Cité*, and he took to visiting her

regularly. She was a former nun, whose predictions produced a tremendous sensation because they invariably materialised. His attention had been drawn to her by Prince Paul Troubetskoi, to whom she had given many proofs of her powers. As he was on the point of buying a house in Paris, he had light-heartedly consulted the clairvoyante, asking her whether she recommended him to do so.

She answered in the affirmative, but added the following mysterious warning: "I see blood in your future house." Undeterred, the Prince bought the house, but when his steward went to take possession of it, the corpse of a lodger, whom the other inhabitants of the house had thought absent, was found on the fourth floor, where he had killed himself a month before.

The Prince recounted this fact to D'Annunzio, who forthwith became for several months an assiduous client of the fortune-teller, to whom, however, he never revealed his name. He had himself announced under the pseudonym of "*l'ami d'Apollon*," and when he sent friends and acquaintances to her (for he advertised her gifts everywhere) they had to say: "I come on the recommendation of Apollo's friend."

This clairvoyante, hidden from view in a dirty tent, into which the client had to pass his right hand, received her visitors with her eyes covered by a bandage. In 1930 D'Annunzio's official soothsayer was a certain Jeanne d'Arc Trinca, who bragged that she was descended from the Maid of Orleans. She lived in Venice; therefore the Poet had to consult her through intermediaries.

He himself, half in jest, half in earnest, had opened in Naples, in 1883, under another name, a free psychological institute, located in a boarding-house kept by a Russian, where he was staying. He launched it through the cheap advertisement columns of the *Corriere di Napoli*, and told me subsequently that clients poured in and always went away satisfied—an affirmation which was no doubt correct.

D'Annunzio likes to have his fortune told by cards and takes advantage of the services of anyone proficient in this pastime. In July, 1919, at a reception given in his honour by his wife, Donna Maria, at her apartment in Piazza di Spagna, in Rome, D'Annunzio's future was read in the cards by a Roman princess,

who was one of the guests. At the end he exclaimed joyfully: "*Triumphs! Triumphs! The cards have been marvellous.*" That day—he told me this later—the Poet decided to march on Fiume.

His wife, Donna Maria, has also showed herself indulgent to his whims in this regard, and is willing to read his horoscope every time they meet, if he expresses the wish for it. Familiar with all the weaknesses of her singular consort, she takes it upon herself to send him every year two popular and remarkable pamphlets which contain historical and meteorological predictions, the *Barbapedana*, by Sesto Cajo Bacelli, and *Doppio Pescatore di Chiaravalle*, which D'Annunzio used to consult conscientiously at the beginning of each year, and from which he refused to be parted.

He also shows himself extremely grateful to his wife, as though she had presented him with the most precious of gifts.

For many years D'Annunzio played lotto, and unless circumstances were unfavourable, or such as to make him forgetful, he bought lottery tickets. He held the opinion that Dame Fortune had to be given the chance to enrich her favourites. He wrote to me in Milan, in 1911, from Arcachon, enclosing an extract from a newspaper: "*I have cut out this advertisement from an illustrated paper. I do not think that this concerns the San Marino Loan, but another. Let us open our doors to fortune. I enclose 50 lire. Buy me 15 tickets and send them to me at once. I, on my part, will perform the corresponding magical manipulations.*"

He has never won anything through lotteries, but he has occasionally won at lotto.

In 1907, I believe, the Poet had left Florence for another town, where a famous motor race was to be held. As usual, he had taken good care not to travel unaccompanied, and this being the case, after three or four days' sojourn in the best hotel of the town, he found himself not only without a penny but in the difficult situation of not knowing how to pay for his return. It was at this critical stage that he received a telegram sent to him from Florence from his faithful servant, Rocco Pesce, which at first sight appeared perfectly sibylline to him. The telegram read: "*Laus Deo 49,000 Rocco.*"

Pondering over this a few hours later, and having suddenly

remembered that he had played at lotto a week before, he immediately wired to his servant and received confirmation of the unexpected stupendous piece of luck, which solved his intricate financial situation at one stroke. The trey which had brought him fortune was 6.27.42, and he has played it ever since, out of gratitude and in the hope that his success might be repeated. Generally he plays 100 lire at a time.

Another craze of D'Annunzio at that time (I say "at that time" because he abandoned it after he settled down at the Vittoriale) is that which, for want of a better name, I shall call his *search for symbols*. All the objects and ornaments which adorned the rooms of the Vittoriale, arranged by him according to his personal taste, represented different symbols, mostly of a humorous or slightly licentious character, on which he liked to project his scintillating wit for the benefit of his visitors. Thus, showing, for instance, the reproduction of the *Leda and the Swan* of Michelangelo, round which he had disposed a multitude of small silver cocks, he would make you observe the attitude of the latter, who only contemptuously endured the fact that a mere swan should have such a beautiful lady as his mistress, while they had to content themselves with hens: D'Annunzio rendered these supposed feelings with the pungent colloquialisms of the Abruzzi.

He would also draw attention to the small feminine nude who prudently hid behind the complete works of Bossuet, so as not to scandalise the illustrious preacher; and he would also point to bronze tortoises which served as paper-weights on mounds of unopened telegrams.

Another idiosyncrasy of D'Annunzio, akin to the one of giving fantastic names to women who interest him, is that of changing the names of men and places, and finally of adopting pseudonyms for himself.

For instance, as I have related elsewhere, the composer Pizzetti, who was also a collaborator, was one day christened by the Poet "*Hildebrando da Parma*," and this title became of such current use that it was engraved on all the musical scores which the *maestro* had composed for the Poet.

One of his favourite comrades—companion of air adventure and of glory, who died a heroic death during the war after

having taken part with the Poet in the raid over Vienna—whose name was Allegri, was called by him "*Fra Ginepro*." He calls the countryside of the Gardone Riviera "*Città di Benaco*," and would like this name to be adopted by the city . . .

We now come to his personal pseudonyms. I do not mean the literary ones, of which the first, "*Albo Laerzio Floro*," was adopted in his sixteenth year and was given up simultaneously with his journalistic activities. The pseudonyms assumed by him at that time (that is to say, between 1883 and 1886) are numerous and well known: *Duca Minimo*, *Myr*, *Marchese di Caulonia*, *Philippo la Selvi*, *Malo*, *Svelt*, *Puck*, *Lola*, *Biscuit*, *Vere de Vere*, *Happemouche*, *Shium Sui Katzu Kava*, *Miching Mallecho*. On the other hand, those which he adopted in his private life remained unrecorded; he uses them when convenient to hide his own identity.

In the choice of these the Poet, with his usual sagacity, always looked for initials similar to his own (that is, G. or A.) to avoid confusion with the initials already on his trunks, his suit-cases and his underwear.

In France, where for some time he wished to live completely incognito, to avoid tiresome visitors and, even more, his creditors, he adopted three successive names: *Guy d'Arbes*, *Guy d'Ardres* and *Gerard d'Agaune*, and from 1908, to go back even further, he assumed the name of *Gentile d'Albenga*, on the occasion of his brief retreat in the Monastery of "Monte Cassino."

The monks believed that he had shut himself within the cell to meditate in solitude—thus, at least, he had assured them—but the reason of his stay was unfortunately of a sinful nature. He had gone there solely because a Neapolitan lady had demanded from him this proof of his love before granting to him what he asked of her.

Even at that time, it may be seen, to mix the sacred and the profane was for him an irresistible temptation.

CHAPTER XII

D'ANNUNZIO AND HIS SERVANTS

The Poet checks the kitchen expenses—Nine thousand lire paid to one cook—"The modest Véronique"—Rocco Pesce, the Poet's guardian—A domestic terrified of wild beasts—Anastasia, or the severe mother-in-law—The rendezvous of the phantoms—A cook symbolic of victory—"Frightful things are happening at Mouilleau"—The chambermaid with enigmatic eyes—D'Annunzio cohabits with Dante and Virgil—"Per non dormire"—"Sœur Ragoût"—Isidore repeats the gesture of Vatel.

RICH or poor, we have all of us had servants, if only temporarily. Even the peasants have domestics and, without doubt, the latter frequently find someone in a still more humble condition to help them. Although it is affirmed that ants enslave inferior insects, I do not pretend that it is a law of nature to be served, but at least it is a human habit.

We are all aware that, nine times out of ten, a servant will desert an employer for a better place or, what is worse, will depart when, for one reason or another—usually money—the situation ceases to be ideal.

I would be the last to contend that D'Annunzio's home was, or ever had been, ideal for the servant. To begin with, the work was hard and uninterrupted. If the master was most amiable, he was also most exacting. He insisted upon perfect order and meticulous cleanliness. He was suspicious. And we must not forget that all of his homes have been rather museums than houses, so that a feather duster wielded carelessly may well destroy an object of great value.

The Poet's system of living was peculiar to himself, and in no way resembled that of society people or of other artists. He objected strenuously if any of his servants decided to marry. In 1913 he wrote to me: "*I am much disturbed about Secondo's matrimonial project. He is making a great mistake. I am afraid I shall have to let him go.*" Then there were times when he personally surveyed the kitchen expenses. He wrote me at

Arcachon: "*Please find out the amount of the household expenses (with the exception of the kitchen, to which I will attend) to be paid at the end of the month.*" But these rigorous periods of administration, almost always occasioned by incredible extravagance for which the kitchen was 5 per cent and the Poet 95 per cent to blame, rarely lasted more than a week.

He liked to order personally those supplies which may be classified as *de luxe*. He argued that the servants, worried lest they spent too much money, never made these purchases properly.

There was never a fixed hour for meals or, rather, never until he finally settled at the Vittoriale.

As to money, periods of extreme opulence were invariably followed by periods of almost complete poverty, and at such times the amount of unpaid wages often reached a fabulous figure. But D'Annunzio never failed to pay to the very last penny. I personally handed one cook nine thousand lire—only a part of three years' wages which had accumulated. However, there are servants who do not care to wait for ever for their money and, particularly, when their master is indulging in submarine warfare, bombing the enemy from a plane or taking part in an infantry attack.

In spite of all his eccentricities, the Poet had always been adored by his domestics, who, men and women, had gladly agreed to share his ups and downs of fortune and had never willingly abandoned him. He was equally popular with hotel employees. At the Hôtel Cavour, in Milan, there was, for years, a chambermaid whom he called "*the modest Véronique.*" She watched for his arrival as excitedly as if he had been the Prodigal Son. Véronique very nearly lost her place on more than one occasion because, when the Poet was there, she neglected all the other visitors completely.

That was not all. His servants had always approved his tastes and accepted and respected his eccentricities. They had helped him to indulge his virtues and his pleasures and, what is unheard-of, they had all, without exception, been absolutely and inexplicably discreet. I cannot say whether they were prompted by fear, affection, admiration or fancy; but they had been discreet.

Since D'Annunzio's servants have all been exceptional beings—while they were in his employ, at least—and since one went so far as to commit suicide simply because he had displeased his master, I consider it of interest to include them in this book—the more so because their lives were built around that of their extraordinary employer.

* * * * *

Among the male servants, valets, chefs, grooms, guardians, coachmen, chauffeurs (there were eighteen on the list at the Villa Capponcina and only one when he arrived in France), the place of honour, both from the standpoint of importance and of length of service, goes indisputably to a curious individual by the name of Rocco Pesce.

Born in the same city, in the same year and in the same month as his master (he boasted, when he was in a confidential mood, of having shared a wet-nurse with the Poet, who never contested the veracity of the statement), Rocco Pesce served D'Annunzio from 1895 until 1911. Wily as the wiliest of peasants, this domestic was close-mouthed, and the language he employed was strictly personal and almost incomprehensible. Although he was as ignorant as a savage, and had only received the most rudimentary education, he rapidly gained the Poet's absolute confidence.

For obvious reasons the first quality D'Annunzio always looked for in a servant was discretion. Rocco Pesce ("Rock Fish") was as silent and discreet as his name implies. D'Annunzio was kind and generous to him in many respects, and in the matter of clothes as he was of the Poet's height and weight, he was relieved of all concern as to wearing apparel.

Always dressed as a perfect gentleman, he cared not whether the cost of serge and tweed went high or low, but he frowned when he polished his master's shoes, and he even complained of the Poet's extravagance in this respect because his big toes refused formally to adopt the footwear which represented the best efforts of the bootmakers of the world.

With the exception of his disapproval of D'Annunzio's feet, he was a devoted servant and looked upon the Poet as a

demi-god whose most mysterious commands and countermands should never be questioned.

When D'Annunzio changed mistresses—a move he made without consulting Rocco Pesce—the fish-like face plainly showed his discontent, because he disliked, on principle, all changes. In his opinion a change of any sort implied new difficulties and new responsibilities without counting the increased expenses occasioned by the enthusiasm of the hour. It was therefore wise to wait a month or more before asking his opinion on his master's latest "conquest." He would have refused to reply unless by a slight nod, accompanied by a most peculiar movement of the right hand, which he lifted to his forehead and proceeded to wave slowly. I always interpreted this to mean: "We are concerned with a poet, and it is therefore useless to expect him to behave reasonably and seriously like we others."

If something displeased him—and this happened every time his master made, in his opinion, a mistake in judgment, either in affairs of love or money or when he feared lest his health be endangered by his amorous excesses—he determined to exert his authority. He was armed with powerful arguments, both hygienic and financial, but D'Annunzio was armed, equally powerfully, with the incontestable right to do as he pleased. The violent explanations on these subjects usually took place in the morning when the Poet was taking his bath. They exchanged bitter words, and the discussion was terminated by an indelicate allusion, on the part of Rocco Pesce, to his master's age and, on the part of D'Annunzio, by a wet sponge hurled at his servant's head. The servant went off grumbling to his room, but he was satisfied because he had accomplished what he considered his sacred duty.

In all seriousness, if Rocco Pesce cherished a boundless admiration for the Poet, he heartily disapproved of the man.

"Dear Signor Tom," he said to me one morning at the Hôtel Meurice, after having waited up all night in vain for his master's return, "when he has finished writing, we will have to unscrew his head and replace it with yours or mine. He must not be allowed to continue this way!"

When the Poet was at work he became taboo in Rocco Pesce's

eyes. The man or the woman who insisted on disturbing him would have had to deal with Rocco Pesce first. He had his orders. They were explicit and they permitted of no misinterpretation or exception. He would not have hesitated to strangle the visitor or the friend who refused to bow before the discipline which was prescribed.

"The *Maître* is at work!" he was accustomed to announce on these occasions. If this declaration proved insufficient, Rocco Pesce slammed the door in the face of the would-be intruder. During these periods he imposed upon himself the strictest of regulations: he mounted guard constantly and personally; he never left the house; he even went to the point of preparing the master's food, of carrying it to him silently and of putting it down beside him without uttering a single word. D'Annunzio called him "*the guardian of my work.*"

These habits had so deeply rooted in him the conviction that he *collaborated* in the Poet's writing that, when the work was finished, he celebrated the event by an orgy, in the course of which he got fantastically drunk and telegraphed or communicated the good news personally to D'Annunzio's friends and admirers.

"We have finished *Le Feu*," he declared with the utmost gravity to the Marquis d'Ajeta when the ink was scarcely dry on the last page of the manuscript of the celebrated novel, "and if I had not been here it would never have been done."

This reminds me of another amusing incident which concerns Anatole France. The great French writer had promised me a preface to appear in the first number of a periodical which I was editing. I arrived by appointment at the Villa Saïd. His housekeeper, displaying her prettiest smile, informed me, in the most natural way in the world: "I suggest that you come again in three days. I know that he promised you the text for to-day, but I *noticed* yesterday that he was not in the mood to write and I advised him to put it off—in your own interest."

Despite the long years passed in the glorious wake of D'Annunzio, Rocco Pesce remained the most primitive of beings. Superstitious as only peasants can be, Rocco Pesce, who would

have faced any earthly danger during the day, was quite a different person after dark. Was it the inexplicable return of atavistic frights or the fruit of the unbelievable ignorance of the European fauna? Neither D'Annunzio nor I was ever able to discover. At all events, to go at night from the Capponcina to Florence (a distance of two or three miles on the main highway) was a journey never undertaken for pleasure.

One day, in Paris, the Poet's eldest son, Mario, tried to convince him that the earth revolved round the sun, Rocco Pesce, having listened to him patiently, assumed the tone of a member of the Holy Office questioning Galileo, and smilingly put this question to the boy whom he had seen at his birth: "Now, Mario, do you really think I have become such an utter idiot as to believe anything so absurd?"

Such was Rocco Pesce, the most faithful, the most devoted and the most obstinate of D'Annunzio's servants. He knew, hour by hour, the secrets of the Poet's life and particularly his pecuniary situation. He frequently found himself obliged to lend his master, on the first of the month, the wages he had received on the last day of the month before. In March, 1910, he accompanied D'Annunzio into exile. He admired Paris and lived there several months happily enough, but without understanding anything of the strange and tumultuous life of the great metropolis. The French language conveyed less than nothing to him, and he listened to it, smiling and nodding, as though he had been assisting at a conversation between monkeys. In July, 1910, having asked D'Annunzio for a vacation, he returned to Italy. He never rejoined the Poet.

His proverbial parsimony, united with his master's proverbial generosity, permitted him to start in business in Pescara and even to buy a small house. Thus, by a strange coincidence, did he become a proprietor at the moment when his master ceased to be one, the Capponcina and all the valuable objects it contained having been sold at auction.

* * * * *

Apart from Rocco Pesce, during the entire time the Poet dwelt in Tuscany, we find another strange personage in the

chambermaid, Anastasia. Small, dry, unattractive, she was a native of the region of the Lake of Orta. She entered the service of D'Annunzio when she was about forty and for about ten years—and apart from her work, which she did faithfully and well—she played for him the rôle of a just but severe mother-in-law. Just as he submitted to Rocco Pesce's observations on matters of money, so did he listen indulgently to Anastasia's reprimands of a moral character. She admitted that it was reasonable enough for the Poet to have a mistress, but she objected to changes even more strenuously than did Rocco Pesce. If the new "queen" was received with suspicion by the manservant, she was treated with open hostility by the chambermaid.

On such occasions Anastasia came to me with her troubles because, as I was born on the Lago Maggiore, she considered me almost a compatriot. "You understand," she said to me, "it is very disagreeable! Just when I'm getting used to one lady, and when I even begin to find her sympathetic, the master gets tired of her!"

"But, my dear Anastasia," I told her conciliatingly, "all men are alike in that respect."

"How well I know it, and that's why I never have anything to do with any of them!" And she frowned at me.

When the Poet departed for France, Anastasia retired to the borders of the lake where she had first seen the light of day. She took away with her, as a souvenir, a volume in which D'Annunzio had written, in guise of a dedication: "*In memory of long nocturnal watches.*" He was evoking the nights at Marina di Pisa where he had composed "*Forse che sì, forse che no*" and the other nights when he had done no writing but when Anastasia had waited up "just in case," to employ her own expression. Three years later she appeared at Arcachon, where her arrival was accompanied by tragic circumstances. This is what D'Annunzio wrote me on the subject: "*Here—always dramas. The day before yesterday Anastasia arrived without notice. A quarter of an hour later she fell downstairs and hurt herself very badly. She fainted dead away, and I thought she had departed this world. Of course, the entire household was in a terrible state of excitement! Anastasia is now confined to her bed, and will be for some time.*"

It is evident that she brought with her the bad luck of the Capponcina."

For nearly seven months no one replaced either Rocco Pesce or Anastasia, for the simple reason that the Poet was living in a hotel. It was not until August, 1910, that he moved into the villa at Arcachon, where he engaged a general housework girl who answered to the romantic name of Noémi.

How different was this from the happy days at the Capponcina where D'Annunzio had lived like a prince of the Renaissance. Eighteen servants! This extravagance so astonished a friend to whom the Poet had complained of his financial difficulties that he advised him to decrease the number. D'Annunzio acquiesced. A few months later, chancing to meet the same friend in Milan, he declared: "*You were all wrong in your estimate of the economy to be realised by reducing the number of the personnel. To please you, I dismissed two stable lads and the expenses remain the same.*"

Nevertheless, with perfect philosophy, the Poet found it quite natural, only a few months later, to live in a small villa near Arcachon with no other domestic than a flighty and irritable old maid. His good humour was not in the least affected. He set to work diligently and, just as he had written *Laus Vitæ* and *Forse che sì, forse che no* under the dictatorship of Rocco Pesce, so did he write *Saint-Sébastien* under the influence of Noémi. He worked all night. "*This morning,*" he wrote me from the Moulleau to Paris, "*I went to bed at eight o'clock beneath the frightened eyes of Noémi.*"

As was his habit, D'Annunzio filled the house with innumerable reproductions of pictures of the Saint pierced with arrows. Noémi, devoted to a degree, naturally conceived a boundless respect for her master. Unfortunately, his was a character she could not be expected to completely understand, and life under the same roof with a man as eccentric as D'Annunzio might be enough to unbalance the mind of one who even could comprehend him.

She declared, in a moment of humour, that if she went out into the little garden at nightfall, that she almost expected to meet and converse with Saint-Sébastien, whom she suspected, not without perspicacity, of visiting the Villa Charitas

to supervise the tragedy of which he was the hero.

In my capacity of permanent secretary to the Poet, I went down to the kitchen every evening after dinner to verify the accounts. "How are you, Noémi?" I always asked. "Same as usual," was her laconic reply. "Is the *Maitre* alone?" "I hope you're joking," Noémi almost snapped, "because there are at least seven waiting to talk to him." "And Saint-Sébastien?" I added as if the presence of seven phantoms was an ordinary occurrence. "I haven't seen him to-day," she answered dryly as she bent over her dishes.

"I hate Italians," she declared one day. "Oh! I don't mean you—— Why, do you know that they're selling the Master's house and furniture at auction when I'd gladly pawn my bicycle to help him!"

I had forgotten to say that this phenomenal woman of sixty rode into Arcachon every morning on her bicycle, and that she had the same love for her cycle that Caligula had for his horse.

A few months later D'Annunzio, having received some money and not being too comfortable in the Villa Charitas, moved into the Chalet Saint-Dominique. Noémi understood that the Poet would be obliged to engage several servants for a villa of this importance. She therefore signified her intention of leaving and, a few days later, she rode off on her bicycle, abandoning not only the Poet but the region.

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After Noémi, who was a pre-war discovery, I am forced to jump into the midst of hostilities to find a cook worthy of our attention. This one was a stolid Charentaise, sparing of words, proficient in her work and, although years younger than Noémi, a spotless virgin. It was not for her culinary qualities, which she had not yet displayed, but for her name exclusively that she was promoted to the rank of cook for D'Annunzio. We came upon her in November, 1914.

D'Annunzio, who was then living in an old-fashioned house called the "Pavillon de Luxembourg," in the rue Geoffroy L'Asnier in Paris, had dismissed a temporary cook and had

instructed me to find another. The employment bureau sent me three or four of similar qualifications. When they gave their names, and when D'Annunzio saw that the third applicant was called "Victoire," he said to me: "*Victoire? Engage her immediately!*"

This cook fully justified the Poet's heroic presentiment, for she remained in his house until the victory and was, during the years her master was at the front and up to the beginning of the Fiume expedition, the faithful guardian of the Chalet Saint-Dominique.

I cannot resist the temptation of letting my readers see a few lines of the letter Victoire wrote me when I was in Paris, whither D'Annunzio had sent me a few days after the occupation of Fiume:

"DEAR MONSIEUR ANTONGINI,—

"While our good master is busy conquering cities for his kingdom, I have received the electricity and gas bills amounting to sixty-two francs and fifty centimes and I beg you to send me the amount immediately——"

D'Annunzio and his house were, in Victoire's eyes, so sacred that she refused to permit Monsieur Phillipart, who in 1919 had bought the villa, to visit his own property. I have the long and violent epistles which she addressed to me because she considered me as her master's representative in France and in which she protested vehemently against what she called the unlawful pretensions of the new proprietor.

One day Monsieur Phillipart, a perfect gentleman and a great admirer of D'Annunzio, and who was elected Mayor of Bordeaux a few months later, entered the garden with some friends and was about to visit the house which he had just purchased. Victoire called them all brigands, brutes and Bordelais, an insult which was, for a Charentaise, the worst of all. And this is her account of the annoying incident:

"I am heart-broken, Monsieur, at what is happening here, but it is not my fault. They looked at the writings, they opened the drawers, they went into the library, they played the piano—

they did everything unworthy of supposedly well-bred people—but they are Bordelais."

It goes without saying that the cook, in her excitement, had grossly exaggerated the importance of this intrusion. D'Annunzio, who was in Venice and who had received even more violent letters, threw a tragic light on the affair and wrote to me in Paris:

"It appears that frightful things are happening at Moulleau. Victoire writes me that the new owners act like conquerors, that they read my private papers, and that they only laugh at her objections. Please look seriously into this disagreeable business before it assumes a regrettable character."

Victoire finally had the satisfaction to which she was entitled in return for her limitless devotion to the Poet, and for her attachment to the house. Like a mother hen leading a brood of chickens, she only abandoned the Chalet Saint-Dominique in October, 1919, at the head of the moving vans containing D'Annunzio's possessions, which she had so valiantly defended against the iconoclasts and the so-called invaders.

* * * * *

It was in the spring of 1912, when D'Annunzio was living temporarily at the Hôtel d'Iéna, in Paris, that there appeared on the horizon an absolutely priceless chambermaid. She was a *Parisienne*—I may even say *ultra-Parisienne*, since she was born in Montmartre. She presented herself along with a letter of introduction from the theatrical impresario Schurmann, who was a good friend of the Poet's. The latter, who was in a very bad humour, asked me to interview her, for he vaguely needed a maid, as he was about to return to Arcachon.

I accordingly went down to the lobby of the hotel, where I found the future "Aélis," who, at the time of writing, is in the Poet's service, although she no longer lives in his house, and is, so to speak, an extra help. At first sight I was not impressed. She was modestly attired; she had a pale, emaciated face; she was neither pretty nor unattractive. But I was struck by her astonishing eyes. They were the eyes of an excited woman,

and it seemed to me that she sought to hide this expression the way one would seek to conceal a physical deformity which might create an unfavourable impression on someone whom one desired to impress. Apart from this peculiarity, her appearance was that of a woman of about twenty-eight, shy, hesitant and gentle. I exchanged a few words with her, asked her to wait and went upstairs to confer with D'Annunzio. Had I failed to mention her eyes, it is highly probable that the Poet, who had no urgent need for a chambermaid and who always detested new servants, would have refused to see her. But his curiosity was piqued by my description of the magnetic eyes, because all feminine singularities, whether physical or moral, interest him greatly. When she appeared, he exchanged a few words with her, and asked her to wait downstairs for his decision. She had barely closed the door behind her than he said to me: "*It's plain to see that you're in an indulgent mood to-day where women are concerned! I find her a very ugly duckling!*" But, knowing the man with whom I had to deal, I was not deceived. I was certain that he had decided to employ her. Sure enough, after a short silence, he declared: "*We might as well engage her! She'll do as well as another——*"

Three or four days later the new domestic followed D'Annunzio to Arcachon. I was detained in Paris for about a week on some business for the Poet. When I rejoined him in Arcachon and lunched with him as usual, I scarcely recognised, in the maid who waited on us, the timid creature I had seen in Paris. Her appearance had improved tremendously. Her hair was charmingly arranged and a nicely fitting black dress made her appear more like an English governess of excellent family than an ordinary chambermaid. I could not help but say, as soon as she left the room: "*Amélie certainly has changed for the better!*"

The Poet looked up with that little smile so characteristic of him when he is slightly disconcerted by a sudden interruption of his thoughts, and he replied: "*Not Amélie! Aélis! I changed her name—er—well, you see—Amélie struck me as being—too prosaic!*"

From that day Aélis became for D'Annunzio a perfect

housekeeper. Silent, faithful, incorruptible, she was, for the Poet, indispensable for long years.

The conquest of Fiume separated her from her master. Having remained in Venice in care of a house which D'Annunzio was never to inhabit—the Barberigo Palace—she developed an affection for the surroundings, and thus she was lost to her master.

* * * * *

At Venice, during the entire war, apart from Aélis and a Venetian cook, Albina—a woman full of culinary talent and affection and who long reigned in the kitchens of the Vittoriale under the charming name of “Sœur Ragoût”—D'Annunzio had a Dante in his service. He was not Dante Alighieri reincarnated for the circumstance (much as that would have pleased Conan Doyle), but Dante Fenzo, gondolier in fact and by hereditary right, because he was the descendant of a celebrated line of Venetian gondoliers.

D'Annunzio took him into his service not by deliberate choice, but because Dante was a member of the personnel of the Casetta Rossa, the house which he rented in Venice from the Prince of Hohenlohe during the war. Dante was a strange little individual who had nothing Dantesque about him unless it was his nose and his extremely suspicious character.

For the life of me I cannot explain why this man was never mentioned in the legends which the journalists invented each day about D'Annunzio. It would have been so charming to narrate, for example, that the Poet had given him this immortal name simply for the pleasure of saying: “Dante, shine my shoes,” or “Dante, lay out my evening clothes,” and thus humiliating, indirectly, the author of *The Divine Comedy*.

But this is not the only amusing homonymy. When Dante arrived at Gardone, always in D'Annunzio's service, he found himself face to face with—Virgil! The gardener of the Villa Cargniacco which D'Annunzio had rented bore the name of the author of the *Æneid*.

The Poet was in the habit of happening upon domestics with illustrious names. At Arcachon, when he asked for a laundress, he was told to go to Madame du Barry!

I can affirm that the three great poets got along famously together and that, if Dante eventually returned to Venice, it was only because he yearned for his ancient trade of gondolier.

This odd coincidence of famous names, united under one roof, had an unexpected result. It permitted the funereal Giolitti, Italian Prime Minister, to make probably the only pun he ever made in the course of a very long life. When his friend, the Deputy Facta (from whom I have the story), told him that D'Annunzio had a gardener known as Virgil, Giolitti, who considered the Poet—and quite correctly—as his sworn enemy, replied: "So he's not only got a Dante, but a Virgil with him! If he fails to profit by that admirable opportunity to go to hell, it will be a great pity!"

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If the faithful Rocco Pesce ceded his post as Minister of the Interior of D'Annunzio's home to the Frenchwoman Aélis, and if she, in her turn, passed it on to the gondolier Dante Fenzo, during the Venetian period, the person who superintended the direction, not without prestige and glory, during the war and the Fiume expedition, was a Roman by the name of Italo Rossignoli.

What a difference between the taciturn Dante and the exuberant Italo! Italo, a delightful fellow, full of life and health, always smiling, gifted with that special sensitiveness to be found in all simple and primitive souls, did not content himself with blindly executing his master's orders, but being an admirable mimic, he adopted the attitudes, the expressions and even the handwriting of the Poet.

The commander of Fiume being, in his eyes, a sort of divine being, it was natural enough for Italo to model himself after the god he served. D'Annunzio's most literary phrases served him under all circumstances. For instance, speaking of Fiume, he said: "The train from Venice arrives in the *holocaust city*——" or, on another subject: "These lobsters from the *very bitter Adriatic* are exquisite." His adoration for D'Annunzio caused him to have imaginary fears for his master's safety. Considering me as one of the very few people whom he could trust, he wrote

me letters like this: "My dear Tom, I know your great fraternal love, and I do not doubt your interest. I enclose a package containing a medal. Let me pin the medal on your breast, that of a faithful one, stainless and fearless. We two alone are the avowed faithful followers of our chief. Do not separate yourself by a hair's breadth from Gabriele D'Annunzio! Show me the enemy and I will cut his throat! I embrace you.—ITALO."

On his visiting cards, under his name, he had printed D'Annunzio's celebrated motto: *Per non dormire* ("So as not to go to sleep"). When he had himself photographed he insisted on a background exactly the same as the one the Poet had used for a picture and, if he gave away a photograph, he did not content himself with signing it, but, like his master, added a motto of his own invention.

Gifted as he was with the sensibilities of an animal (I deliberately employ the word in a flattering sense), nothing which his master was thinking or planning escaped Italo. He scented D'Annunzio's ideas before he had manifested them and, if the Poet's mind was centred on a woman, his flair was positively uncanny. Very honest, very loyal, he could be frank and courageous when the occasion demanded, and he did not hesitate to disapprove of his master when he judged him to be in the wrong even—and this was most amusing—about political affairs.

When I commissioned him to tell D'Annunzio something which was certain to displease him, he said: "I'll tell him when he's in his bath. It won't be so dangerous for me"; for I had neglected to state that Italo had received some rather severe smacks from the Poet when he had particularly annoyed him.

Italo Rossignoli was, to all intents and purposes, the *Comandante's* orderly. He lived so intimately with his master and was able to approach him so easily that he possessed a power which, without being official, was certainly considerable. At Fiume everyone was aware of this: the Legionaries, the friends, the women. The consequence was that Italo was besieged with the most extravagant requests. Things got to such a pass that he no longer knew which way to turn. He entreated everyone to leave him alone, and cursed his celebrity. He declared to me one day: "You're fortunate because you're only the private secretary! I'd like to see you try to handle all those

women and all those ministers" (he exaggerates not as to the quality but as to the quantity) "who give me commissions for the *Comandante!*"

When he asked D'Annunzio to give him a title which he could print on his visiting cards, the *Comandante* laughed at him and said: "*You can put: 'Attached to the Comandante's Boots!' "*" The Poet called him the "*Canterotoctone*," which in Greek means the bottle-breaker, because he had carelessly smashed some bottles of perfume. Nevertheless, he esteemed Italo's opinion and frequently paid far more attention to it than to that of a superior officer.

Italo Rossignoli remained with D'Annunzio all through Fiume and accompanied him to Gardone, discharging duties which ultimately became those of a combination major-domo and orderly, valet and confidant, and he always acquitted himself of his duties with a slavish devotion.

During the Fiume period D'Annunzio had a chauffeur whom he christened, for obvious reasons, "Thunderbolt Basso." Unhappily for the "Thunderbolt," his passion for speed induced him to become a motor-cycle racer and he ended by killing himself at a sharp turn. He also adored his master. After he had left his service he said to me: "How can I help adoring the *Comandante*? Isn't it thanks to him that I have been made Chevalier of the Crown of Italy?"

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Of all of D'Annunzio's domestics there is one whom I have specially reserved for the last, although, in point of time, he was among the first. His name was Isidore Vittorelli.

It was at Albano, not far from Rome, that the Poet discovered him at the end of the year 1896, in the course of one of his frequent excursions to the Lake. Isidore was working in a little hotel, which now is commonly known as "The Hotel of the Triumph of Death," in recognition of D'Annunzio's novel in which he immortalised the place.

Isidore, who was a passionate reader of the Poet's books and an incessant talker, implored him to take him into his service. D'Annunzio, who appreciated his delicacy and his discretion, acquiesced and, after several months, which permitted him to

appreciate his excellent qualities, he took him to Paris. The Poet made the journey to be present at the performances of *Città Morte*, which Sarah Bernhardt was producing at her own theatre, and also to attend to the publication of *L'Enfant de Volupté*.

When D'Annunzio returned to his hotel after long and tiresome evenings, he found regularly in the hall of the small apartment which he occupied a veritable crowd of admirers of both sexes, laden with flowers and enthusiastic verses and in quest of signatures. The Poet, who always abominated this sort of thing, became more and more nervous and blamed Isidore for it all, accusing him of being incapable of protecting him from these well-meaning nuisances. One day he got thoroughly angry and sent Isidore back home to Italy.

Isidore departed obediently, but he became so distressed at having displeased his master that, after having passed several days at the Capponcina, he gave a banquet to which he invited all the servants of the house and some friends from Settignano. When the festivities were over, he retired to his room and shot himself.

"On that occasion," D'Annunzio declares, whenever he recalls that unfortunate episode, "*the French newspapers were faithful to their habitual bad taste in my regard. 'Gil Blas,' in particular, published an article about the suicide and employed these ill-chosen words: 'Isidore killed himself manière de la maison.'*"

But the Poet forgets the Italian papers! The *Gazette of Turin* likewise reported the death under the heading: "Death of the Valet of the Super-Rapagnetta, D'Annunzio."

CHAPTER XIII

CREATING A MASTERPIECE

The powerful and imperious voice—"Festina lente!"—Incubation, documentation, creation—The mobilisation of the booksellers—The warehouse of the intellect—The Poet's note-books—The "*monstrous*" wood-worm—The fourth youth of the Poet—D'Annunzio and Lamartine—*Spring, sweet enemy*—The manuscript—The insatiable Remington—News of victory—The untiring copyist—"Alleluiah!"
—The "*Golden Fleece*" of Maurice Barrès.

IF, as some believe and assert, the creation of a work of art must be subordinated to a severe self-discipline, applying to both body and mind, it looks as though D'Annunzio had all his life done all he could to avoid creating, because few artists have been more systematically and brazenly irregular in their working habits than the Poet.

It would have been just as impossible for D'Annunzio to constrain himself to fixed hours of the day or night for producing a definite intellectual output under a regime such as Emile Zola imposed upon himself, as it would have been for him to desire a woman at a predetermined moment.

He would not entertain the idea of work unconnected with creative frenzy; neither would he subscribe to the conviction, emphasised on all occasions by the illustrious and prolific French author, that there was no better system of stimulating phantasy than to sit down at a table and begin writing—as though the proverb "*L'appétit vient en mangeant*" applied in the domain of the intellect. During the whole of his life D'Annunzio has never set pen to paper unless commanded by his genius to do so. No seduction exercised by offers of money, no entreaties, no sense of moral obligation, have ever forced him to work when he did not feel in the mood for it, nor, on the other hand, has he ever forgone the joy or the divine torment of creating when the spirit has moved him. He has always been the slave of a will

superior to his own—that “*afflatus Dei*” of which the ancients speak.

In 1903, presenting a manuscript to the town of Chieti, which had conferred upon him its honorary citizenship, he expressed himself as follows: “*The profound things that ancient and hereditary blood whispers to you, I have heard them in my attentive silence, and in expressing them to-day, I seem to be but faithfully repeating that which was ‘dictated’ to me by a powerful and imperious voice.*” And further on: “*A new citizen, I give back with humility that which is not mine: the manuscript consisting of the original pages on which the poet’s hand wrote ‘that which was mysteriously dictated.’*”

Thus, alone can we find an explanation for the innumerable and fantastic promises fated to remain unfulfilled or to be forgotten. Anyone who was misled by a happy combination of events into thinking that he had forced D’Annunzio into performing some given task was absolutely in the wrong. The intentions were germinating in D’Annunzio’s brain, but that was all, and he merely hypnotised his petitioner into believing that they had been carried out.

He was the first to recognise this mental incapacity to write to order. One day (I was then his publisher) he wrote to me:

“*Dear Tom, I was tormented by your request. There is no solicitation tempestuous enough to force me to rush my work. I cannot surrender my purpose, which is to use the whole of my strength in order to place a profound imprint on my work. ‘Festina lente!’*”

This was in 1906, and during the same year, later on, he wrote to me:

“*For days and days I have been trying to make the effort to write the preface to the Ode to Vesuvius, and I am unable to vanquish the heavy inertia which is oppressing me. I suffer a good deal, and melancholy drains me of my vitality.*

“*To-night I hope to be able to write a few pages.*

“*There are few things to which I am less adapted than writing of this kind.*” This letter is dated May 5th, 1906.

Many years later he wrote to me in a similar state of mind: “*The wish to write continues to evade me; it is not worth the effort.*”

In affirming this he was not only truthful but perfectly consistent with himself, although we might logically infer from the foregoing that his innumerable promises to publishers and famous actors and actresses, as well as his unfulfilled projects, were so many tricks to placate his entourage, to hold out some transitory hope, or, even worse, to extort from them the money which he needed.

This is untrue, for at the moment of promising something he has always acted in perfectly good faith.

The trouble is that he "counted his chickens before they were hatched," as his ever-active brain, while it encouraged him in his ambitious intentions, refused to help him carry them out when the psychological moment came.

* * * * *

The inception of each new masterpiece by D'Annunzio has proceeded on the same lines. The mental processes and the mode of life attendant upon creation have always been identical. Apart from slight modifications due to different conditions and directly concerned with the Poet's state of mind, time and place, the actual execution has developed according to immutable rules. In the same way that he wrote *La Pisanella* and the *Vita di Cola di Rienzo*, the *Contemplazione della Morte* and the *Francesca di Rimini*, so have four consecutive phases marked the birth and the unfolding of every D'Annunzian creation. They are, *incubation*, *documentation*, *actual creation*, and finally the *decisive* phase, or that of the actual writing of the new work.

Let us examine the first one—that is, the incubation period. He feels welling up within him the indeterminate urge to create, to compose—in a word, to write. He finds himself in the state of mind of a man who, experiencing an immense need to love, has yet not found an object on whom to lavish the treasure of his affection.

This incubation period, as a rule, follows upon a long period of either ennui or of social, political, or even sporting activities wholly unconnected with literary interests. In order to emerge successfully from them, as D'Annunzio wrote, "*one must not only overcome the laziness of one's mind, which for some time has lost the habit of clothing thoughts in befitting language, and with-*

drawn rebelliously from the tormenting bondage of art, but one must even conquer a physical repugnance to the strenuous exercise implied by using one's pen." The incubation stage sometimes lasts a long while, during which D'Annunzio can be said to be staggering about in darkness, fruitlessly searching, *ubi consistam*, for his mind and his imagination.

At times a vague sense of sadness due to physical preoccupations disturbs him and prevents him from setting to work. In 1921 he wrote to me from Gardone: "*I do not feel well and am very melancholy; troubles never cease, yet I would like to bring to fruition all that is flowering within me.*"

At other times some unexpected happening wrenches the shackles from his uncertainty and propels his mind in a different direction.

Thus we owe to the death of his friend, Adolphe Bermond, the creation of the *Contemplazione della Morte*; to the intimate confession of another friend *La Leda senza Cigno*; to the tragic vicissitudes of an individual discovered by his friends, Angelo Conti and Marius de Maria, in a sinister tavern, the *Giovanni Episcopo*; to a book into which he dipped at the bookseller Flory's shop, *Histoire de l'Île de Chypre sous les Lusignans*, the *Pisanella*; to the two perfect legs of a woman, as we shall see further on, *Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*.

On other occasions, during that period of slow and sub-conscious incubation, one particular phantasm among hundreds of others has forced itself upon his imagination. Day by day it takes on more precise outlines, until it finally transforms itself into the actual picture of the work which the Poet is destined to complete.

For one reason or another, from that moment we enter into the second creative phase of the Poet, that of *documentation*. It presents but little importance for some of his works, such as *Giovanni Episcopo* and *Contemplazione della Morte*; for others, only a very relative one, as with *L'Innocente*, *Trionfo della Morte*, *Forse che sì, forse che no*, *Fuoco*, *La Figlia di Jorio*, *La Fiaccola sotto il Moggio*, *Più che l'Amore*, *Laus*, *Vitæ*; but for the following, *La Nave*, *Pisanella*, *Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*, *Fedra*, *Francesca da Rimini*, *Vita di Cola di Rienzo*, *La Città del Silenzio*, *La Canzone di Garibaldi*, *Le Canzoni della gesta d'Oltremare*

documentation proves indispensable and apt to take up a considerable amount of time and labour.

In this period, which we have called the period of *documentation*, D'Annunzio acquires and successively devours all the books which have a direct or indirect bearing on the subject which interests him at the moment, and of which he has compiled an interminable list in his own hand in advance.

His booksellers are literally mobilised; at times their searches takes seeming ages, because the books required by the Poet are either out of print or only published in limited editions: in fact they are almost impossible to find or are too highly priced. Nevertheless, he rarely gives up his quest. For the sake of twenty lines which alone have a particular interest for him D'Annunzio is capable of buying at an exorbitant price, an *opus* that consists of ten volumes, although it may be fated to remain unopened, once he has consulted two or three pages at the most. In extreme cases he has recourse to the Public Libraries, either directly or through an intermediary. For years his friend Annibale Tenneroni took upon himself this task in Italy. Highly cultured, a distinguished connoisseur, inspired, moreover, by the sacred fire of friendship and urged on by his slavish admiration of D'Annunzio, he did not hesitate to spend whole weeks in the dustiest and most uncomfortable libraries, or to undertake long and tedious journeys in pursuance of his task. During D'Annunzio's French period this onerous duty of understudying Tenneroni in the libraries of Paris, Bordeaux and other less important French towns fell to me, though I discharged it less laboriously and with far less competence than he. On extremely rare occasions D'Annunzio would go to a library in person, either in my company or, sometimes, alone.

This patient and tireless search for information, on the subject of which Borgese shows such penetrating and lucid intuition in his study on D'Annunzio, sometimes leads to results that are wholly unexpected.

The Poet, whilst consulting modern or ancient books in order to take notes on certain events, or a certain historical or legendary figure, at times comes across a quotation, a reference, however short and extraneous to the subject, which awakens in him such unquenchable curiosity that it makes him branch off towards a

totally different hero or historical period, of which he has not even been thinking before.

This is enough (I think the case is unique among writers) to make him reverse his entire course and in consequence change his subject altogether.

The original, often by that time almost entirely "documented," is stored in a sort of intellectual depository, whence the Poet, who never either forgets or destroys anything, takes it out again when he considers the moment ripe.

Many of the literary extracts which he includes in the *Faville*, and some others which have appeared in the newspapers, especially the foreign ones, have sprung from such unexpected sources. They are, in fact, only fragments of more vast and complex "themes" which, in spite of their wealth of commentation, had been abandoned for ever. Lastly, it sometimes happens that these painstaking investigations, the results of which are, with D'Annunzio's habitual thoroughness, divided, catalogued, and provided with notes, find no further use. They are only distinguishable by a title, the title of a work fated to remain in an embryonic state.

This happened to a tragedy which he had intended to compose on Peter the Great. He wrote to me from Gardone in February 1922: "*I must collect copious information about the terrible Czar, Peter the Great. I ask you to keep this exotic study secret. It will not be difficult for you to find (and order) historical monographs and works of fiction relating to him.*"

Some years earlier (1905), whilst he was preparing to write *La Vita di Cola di Rienzo*, he wrote to me in Milan: "*With the scrupulous diligence which you know I possess, I have had to pile up documentation. Reading has taken four or five days' meditation, in order to visualise the personage. Now I have my man.*"

During this phase D'Annunzio often reaches the point where he draws up actual drafts of contracts bristling with clauses, and speaks at length about this work to the people it may interest, such as newspaper editors, theatrical impresarios, actors, exactly as though it were already completed, copied and ready for exploitation. This is what happened with regard to *Indian Drama* (D'Annunzio never selected this title), which the Poet promised

to Madame Rubinstein, a tentative contract being drawn up regarding it.

During the period when a historical or mystical subject is on hand, he quite openly takes advantage of the work and erudition of others. If, conversely, the work is based on pure phantasy, or is of mainly psychological tendency, D'Annunzio is assisted by countless and varied notes, which he has jotted down in a series of small books, referring to the most varied periods of his own life.

At the time of the Capponcina he already possessed more than eighty of these, to which he added another dozen during his stay in France. In these "diaries," which he guards with jealous care (only with the greatest persuasion can he be induced to allow one to dip into them), and which will certainly hold immense documentary value for posterity, the Poet writes down things that happen to him or that pass through his mind, during definite periods relating to special events in his life, such as journeys, visits to various places, etc.

The note-books have distinctive titles: "Vienna," "September," "1914," "Egypt." Notes contained in the diaries are at times conceived in haphazard fashion without a connecting link; sometimes they follow a definite occurrence step by step. At other times they are limited to brief records which he reserves the right of developing later. In some cases they take the shape of actual descriptions and long psychological dissertations, which, apart from occasional and superficial revision, are good enough to figure eventually in the text of one of his works.

Here are two examples: One refers to his visit to the Baths of Diocletian, the other to a journey to Vienna, and D'Annunzio, many years later, handed them to me to recopy because the handwriting in pencil was not sufficiently legible and had to be laboriously deciphered even by him. In the first (1897) they are mere skeleton notes. Here is a fragment:

"Great reddish walls in the sun.

"In the shafts of cabs—horses in an attitude of repose. A cat in the sun.

"The alley lies first in the shadow. Blue sky shows between the strong stone bricks.

"On the front arcade a bronze cross.

"Stone blocks. Two beheaded statues, silent, enveloped in togas, formally draped.

"In the court-yard a big vase from which plants are trailing. Two little fountains mourn between the walls. Statues in togas look on, or are headless. Verdure conceals two little cupids carved under the rim of the vase.

"The great hundred-year-old cypresses, contorted, anguished."

In the second memorandum book the reader will see that there also appear light psychological touches. It refers to his journey to Vienna in 1900. Here is a short extract:

"The Prater is nearly deserted. The long interminable avenue. The trees look as though made of fused iron, bare and hard.

"The Giant Wheel with its hanging cars looms gigantic in the sky. It is of the same colour as the trees. Everything seems made of iron and of zinc. On the way back the streets are lit up. A thin bluish mist envelops the other buildings. The column surmounted by Admiral Tegetthoff rears into the air, supporting the hero's statue.

"I cross the bridge over the Danube. The shores are studded with lights. People are in the streets. The ebb and flow of the crowd.

"The immense size of the rich city. The rhythm of life so different from that of our small Italian towns. Barbaric strength; the power of traffic and of work.

"I pass again in front of the Burgtheater where the performance has begun.

"The words of my poetry fall in the auditorium on the ears of the multitude which does not understand them and does not know me. Solitude. Light mental fever. Tiredness. Passion.

"And that old Emperor there in his box, mummified!"

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Thus we reach the third phase, that of actual creation. It lasts, according to circumstances, a month or two. During this phase D'Annunzio does not take up his pen even to make the most insignificant entry. He re-reads the notes he has written, turns over the leaves of some book, and, above all, goes for walks and rides, or indulges his bent for meditation.

His relations with the people who approach him are reduced to a strict minimum. Even the reigning mistress, if she happens

to inhabit his house, becomes, for the time being at least, of secondary importance. It seems as though his eyes pass over her without seeing her. When in company, at lunch or dinner, the Poet is silent, addressing occasionally some futile question to his guest and making no pretence even of listening to the reply.

I remember once at Arcachon lunching with him during one of these spells: from time to time he put to me some banal queries concerning facts or people, without wondering in the slightest why I did not answer him; even, to be more correct, remaining unaware I did not. I cannot even assert that he was at all gratified by my tactful silence. His attitude, as usual, was that of a courteous man, but of a man day-dreaming, and with his spirit beyond reach.

At the end of this period of mental activity, the new work is virtually completed and, from the intellectual point of view, the book is as good as written; the author is absolutely *au fait*, not only with its general development, but with its most insignificant characteristics and its slightest details. It is at that moment, already so clear-cut in his mind, that he can relate it from A to Z in almost the same words which he will subsequently use to commit it to paper.

Nevertheless—an almost incredible statement—the last word has not been said! I have seen D'Annunzio reach this point and (as will be seen further on) fail to set it down in writing, either through unforeseen circumstances or because he evinced a sudden and inexplicable lack of interest for the already created work.

This happened in 1908 with regard to the *Madre Folle*; and with another volume composed of three long novels, entitled, *Tre Assassini*—of which the first, according to the author's programme, was to be a remodelling of *Giovanni Episcopo*—the second *L'Innocente*, and the third, a long new novel. Again in 1906 two other works—one a comedy, *Il Pretendenti*, the other a biography which was to be added to the already published ones of *Cola di Rienzo* and the *Vita di Filippo Strozzi*—remained still-born on account of the same whim.

At that time, in fact, concerning this project he sent me a letter whose interest is such that I withhold any personal comment.

"I am not used to being in such a hurry. '*Festina lente*' has

always been my motto. Moreover, I have never liked the subject of the *Madre Folle* and have no wish to profane it. I need peace and days of unbroken concentration.

"Therefore I am working—and this I confide to you under the seal of the most absolute secrecy—I am working at a tragedy and at a comedy. The tragedy, in three acts, is in prose and is entitled *Più che l'Amore*. The comedy has four acts in prose with a provincial background, and is called *Il Pretendente*.

"I shall finish the tragedy between April and May before I come to Milan. Then I shall go to the sea and shall not move from there until I have completed my novel. I hope to be able to write *La Vita di Filippo Strozzi*, for which I have collected the necessary material, between the two. This Life will be at least as good as that of Cola.

"With two other Lives they will make a good volume, the first of a series. All this information is strictly confidential. I confided only to you and to E.M. the plot of the *Madre Folle*; I now see a notice in the papers which evidently draws its inspiration from an editorial source and which gives away my secret of Michelangelo's consanguinity. What is the explanation?"

Except for the tragedy *Più che l'Amore*, all these remained in the chrysalis stage and were not mentioned again.

At other times the delay was only of a temporary nature. For instance, *Il Ferro* was actually written in 1913, although it was conceived and composed two years earlier.

Thus we reach the fourth and last phase, the decisive and the most arduous one. D'Annunzio is aware of it and confirmed this to me at the time of writing *Cola di Rienzo*: "I am brimming over with the sap, which has accumulated and been too severely repressed by my striving after perfection. I am rent between two forces." But apart from the delays caused by unforeseen circumstances, D'Annunzio is henceforth ready for the long strain to come. Surrounded by all the texts which he has bought and commented on, by the notes which he has taken on loose leaves, by papers full of quotations and references which he goes on gradually accumulating, he sets about his momentous task, and from that moment he writes as though under some magician's spell, uninterruptedly, for eight, twelve, at times fifteen hours a day, giving himself no pause or rest, paying heed

to nothing but his creation. He is capable of covering more than one hundred sheets in a single day.

From 1920 he has always used a writing-pad of light-coloured leather, on which is engraved the following dedication: "From Sister Bianca to Brother Focu, for his immortal work. Fiume d'Italia. 1st of March, 1920."

It was the present of a woman in Fiume. Writing to her eight years later, on the occasion of the visit of one of her relatives to the Vittoriale, he did not forget to refer to it in the following gracious words: "*Your N. leaned over the light-coloured writing-pad which has for eight years supported the burden of my hand, and read, 'Sister Bianca to Brother Focu.'*"

"*It was the 'renaissance' in the City of Life which I mourn like my third youth.*"

"*The fourth will only be granted to me by a beautiful death.*"

"*I have noted,*" he wrote in one of his books, "*that the most beautiful page is written in the hour of dreams, in the hour of the cock, in the hour of the white frost.*"

In 1929, at Gardone, in order to excuse himself for putting off my visit with my daughter to the Vittoriale, he sent me the following note: "*I apologise to Nera for this delay, but not to you, for you surely remember how 'nocturnal' I am! I work from eight at night to the following noon. This morning, in your honour, I stopped at nine. But the usual wearisome postal delivery prevented me from going to bed before ten o'clock.*"

When he has worked all night he sleeps peacefully and, according to his own declaration, without being disturbed by dreams.

Close to his writing-desk invariably stands a tray with a pitcher of iced water, fruit in large quantities, English biscuits and iced tea, which he prefers weak. When he writes his mouth is affected by a superabundance of salivation, which he wipes away with a handkerchief (there are always four or five within reach) clutched in his left hand, which rests on the paper upon which he is writing. Up to the moment of his departure for France—that is, the end of 1910—he wrote for the most part standing in front of a small reading desk. He used quills of which he always had a supply in a bowl in front of him.

This was the time of electric lamps, concealed within small clepsydras of opaque yellow glass, of the monastic bell which

tolled the hours of meals; of the rose petals strewn over the carpets; of everything, in a word, that constituted the material and moral background of the Cinquecento, but that was to appear superfluous to him after the sale of the Capponcina. Nevertheless, he has warred all his life against tapestries, objects, or furniture which offends his taste, and above all he has the most profound hatred of noise.

He had the temerity to complain to me at the Vittoriale that the "deafening" noise of a wood-worm lodged in a piece of furniture in the library absolutely prevented him from working, and he concluded, with his usual sense of humour: "*Fortunately that monstrous wood-worm has been tracked down and exterminated by my servants.*"

Since 1911 he has always used steel pens, and writes seated at a massive walnut table, which was really a refectory table. He has never abandoned this mode of writing, with the sole difference that since 1919 he has not used oil lamps, as he did at the Capponcina and during the French period. Electric light is shed on the ceiling in such a way that the numerous little lamps installed in the cornices remain invisible and give a strong light that is diffused and reflected across the whole room, which looks illuminated *a giorno*.

He has always written—for the last forty years at least—in a dressing-gown or in pyjamas, wearing slippers at night. As he generally retires to his study—the "office," as he calls it—towards ten p.m., after sending all the servants to bed, and meditating in solitude, it is a frequent occurrence that the electric light, whether in the drawing-room, on the stairs, in the bedroom, or in the bathroom, where he may have gone before entering his library, should remain burning until the morning, and only be switched off by the domestics who come in ten hours later to open up the house. It is sufficient to cast a glance at the bills for electric light sent to D'Annunzio to determine exactly whether he is passing through a period of artistic creation, for at such moments they assume spectacular proportions, increasing from a few hundred lire to several thousand a month.

It is strange that, generally speaking, the spring is the season least favourable to D'Annunzio's creative work. He wrote to me twice drawing my attention to this curious phenomenon.

Once from Arcachon: "*Here spring is in full bloom, and work becomes very tiresome to me. Send me your friend's prescription.*"

And once from Paris: "*Work has been hard, and I have had to make a very painful effort. You know that spring is my enemy . . . a sweet enemy.*"

* * * * *

What do D'Annunzio's manuscripts look like?

He writes on sheets of square writing-paper which he numbers progressively, made for him in the paper mills of Fabriano, and during the French period in those of Arches, which furnished him with a large quantity of the same size and shape as the Italian ones.

Concerning this he wrote to me one day from Arcachon: "*Yesterday I received a parcel of 20,000 sheets of writing paper made at Arches, with the motto 'Lest we sleep.' Fabriano's 20,000 were used up. What strange perplexity is mine in front of this virgin mound!*"

The first manuscript, which may be called the original, presents a tortured appearance: it bristles with asterisks, is smudged with corrections and erasures, which in some parts are extremely difficult to decipher, even for anyone familiar with the Poet's handwriting. "*There could be seen, in truth, traces of a sanguinary struggle. Thus the red ink of the didactics and the violent erasures, and the copies and re-copied hemistichs, and the margins sprinkled with asterisks gave a harsh and tortured look on the paper.*" Thus D'Annunzio described one of his manuscript pages. Often, too, it reveals his curiously personal method of selecting words, a method very uncommon among other authors, in the adoption of which he is an imitator of Nero. It consists of writing above or below a word (whether noun, adjective or verb) a list of synonyms or other words bearing more or less the same significance, thus giving himself a chance to select later the word which should figure in the final text.

This first copy remains, so to speak, invisible to all without exception, even to the typist entrusted with the task of copying the D'Annunzian manuscripts.

At the time when D'Annunzio was still ignorant of the advantages and the usefulness of typewriters he had the courage

to impose on himself the task of making as many as three copies of the original manuscript. He toiled laboriously at them, one after another, putting down all the modifications as they occurred.

After 1911 he only copied his work once, and this copy was entrusted to a faithful employee to be typed.

It was I who persuaded him to buy a Remington in 1911 at Arcachon. D'Annunzio found it very expensive (700 francs) and paid it off at the rate of 50 francs a month. On this machine, which he called the "insatiable Remington," and which I am still using at the present moment, were typed all the works and articles written by D'Annunzio between 1911 and 1915, and sometimes he wrote on it himself, naturally with the slowness of a neophyte, but deriving great enjoyment from this.

Nevertheless, he never had a clear idea of its mechanical parts, because sending me one day some pages which contained quotations from the Bible and official matter, he wrote to me most ingenuously: "*See whether you can use different lettering for the Psalms and for the official parts.*"

It was I who bore this onerous responsibility during the whole of the French period. Every morning, at the hour when the poet went to bed after spending the whole night at his writing-desk, a servant handed over to me the precious text which I had to have ready for the same afternoon.

This package was usually accompanied by a few lines written by D'Annunzio before retiring; apart from the customary recommendation, these often contained interesting notes referring to his work and to the hardships which he had endured.

This, by the way, was an old habit with him. Ten years earlier, at the time when I was his publisher and he was writing the *Vita di Cola di Rienzo*, for the review *Il Rinascimento* which my firm was then publishing, he kept me in touch with the progress and the various phases of his creative effort by a continuous series of letters and telegrams.

D'Annunzio often interpolates entire pages in the text of the original manuscript. In such cases, to avoid changing the numbering of the pages, he pastes the added and subsequent pages on to the bottom of the preceding one, thus achieving a length of several yards, which he enjoys exhibiting to his friends.

I have mentioned elsewhere the enormous importance which

he attaches to avoiding printers' errors. I take the opportunity of adding that he never introduces substantial changes into the text of the proofs. In this connection he wrote that he always found it impossible to "*overcome his long-standing repugnance to dictation and the secret shyness of the art which desires no intermediaries or witnesses between its substance and the one who moulds it!*"

During the whole of his life D'Annunzio has never dictated a single line. He is so incapable of composing whilst he dictates that even during the long period of rest and absolute darkness to which he was subjected by the doctors, after damaging the retina of his right eye (to save the other eye, which was endangered), he wrote toilsomely on strips of paper framed on wooden backgrounds, which had been specially constructed for his use.

It was in this way that he composed the greater part of his *Notturmo*.

* * * * *

After he has written the last line of his manuscript, to which he adds the word "*Finis*," D'Annunzio, through an inveterate custom which has become a sort of privilege, is in the habit of sending to editors and (in the case of plays) to his principal interpreters or impresarios brief and exultant telegrams which celebrate his victory over the *Monster*. This is the name he sometimes gave manuscripts with which he has wrestled from the first moment like Jacob with the angel.

It happens at times that his works run to far greater length than he has ever intended, even whilst he is in the act of writing. This applies to *Forse che sì, forse che no*, which was originally cast in a much smaller mould. It gave the editor, Emilio Treves, a pretext for producing that editorial monstrosity, the first edition of the novel, in two volumes, the one (naturally with an eye to profit) appearing later than the other.

The circumstance recurred with regard to the *Leda senza Cigno* which (this time exclusively through the author's fault) appeared not in two but in three volumes. The first (159 pages) contains the story which gives its name to the volume, and the second and the third (of 350 and 556 pages respectively) are in reality only memoirs and reflections, although entitled by him *Licenza*.

of mind of an Italian in these days. By the way, the attitude of the *Excelsior* is unfair. All the news is distorted. Our position is excellent. Yesterday an aviator threw four bombs with magnificent results. If *Excelsior* were to turn Italophobe, I should be unable to publish my two novels in it. I am greatly distressed, but in my state of mind it would be impossible for me to work well at anything but that which I have at heart. I appeal to Pierre Laffitte's human friendship for understanding. *Au revoir. D'Annunzio.*"

He very rarely takes the other course—that is, of shortening a book if he had mapped out a larger canvas for it at the start. The only instance known to me is the *Saint-Sébastien*, with regard to which he intended to write a sixth episode (to be inserted between the third and the fourth) with a circus for background. He gave up this project later.

* * * * *

What I have just described to you is the procedure, the mode, the rhythm—in a word, the *genesis* of all Gabriele D'Annunzio's works written during forty-five years. I have witnessed their inception, either directly, when I lived at his side, or indirectly through his letters or through information imparted to me later by him, from 1900 until the present day.

But since special circumstances allowed me to follow closely—I might even say, verse by verse—the birth of one of his most remarkable masterpieces, the *Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*, written by him in French and therefore accessible to all cultured people, let us watch him creating this special poem, in which one does not know what to admire most: the lyrical impetus, the novelty, or the mastery, of which he gave proof in composing it in a language which was not his own.

* * * * *

It was the spring of 1911 in Paris. D'Annunzio was then staying at the Hôtel Meurice, and led that tempestuous life which I have depicted in another chapter. He was not so much tired as nauseated by his creative unproductiveness.

As each day's social obligations were discharged, new ones rose in ever-increasing volume, submerging him under their relentless pressure.

Unable to escape from the yoke of futile and mundane duties, but rather delaying, as usual, any immediate and courageous decision, his spirit, little by little, conceived a feeling of hatred for the whole of humanity, always the penultimate stage in his reconquest of himself and of his artistic personality.

In spite of these feelings, the situation might have dragged on for months, as had often happened before, if a new fact had not suddenly changed the course of his thoughts. Insignificant in itself, it was of a nature to detach him completely from the unproductive life he had been leading for over three months.

We were in the middle of the Paris season, and at the Opera the Ballets russes were creating a furore. They were under the direction of Fokine, produced by Léon Bakst, and interpreted by the dancer Pavlova, the famous Nijinsky, and the celebrated actress Ida Rubinstein.

I cannot say whether Montesquiou had spoken about them to D'Annunzio, at the house of the Comtesse de Béarn, a devotee of that special form of art and a fervent friend of Ida Rubinstein. It is possible that he may have been reproached in some ultra-Parisian salon for not having yet seen the famous ballet. Perhaps some woman who interested him at that moment may have asked him to visit the Opera on a definite evening. However it may have been, he asked me one morning, whilst I was with him at the hotel, receiving my orders for the day, to go immediately to the Opera and purchase two stalls for the first performance of the ballet *Scheherazade*, which was taking place that evening.

It was unusual for him to prefer my company to that of the lady who filled his affections at the moment: it was even more unusual for him to take stalls instead of a box.

That evening we found ourselves in the third row of the stalls, five minutes before the curtain rose on the ballet. The Poet had not wished to be present at the opera which preceded the ballet, because it did not interest him.

As soon as Ida Rubinstein appeared on the stage he ceased to have eyes for anyone else, and from the moment the performance was over till we returned to the hotel at four o'clock in the morning (because by one of his usual whims he insisted on staying up at the bar) he talked to me only of Ida Rubinstein, of the harmony of all her movements, the grace of her attitudes,

and, above all, of the plastic perfection of her legs.

"*Here,*" he exclaimed, "*are the legs of Saint-Sébastien for which I have been searching in vain all these years!*"

To be frank, I could see no connection between the saint and the Russian dancer, and knew still less why he had been looking for these very legs for years. Ingenuously, I asked him for enlightenment. He explained that he had long been nursing the idea of writing a religious mystery for the theatre according to medieval tradition; that the hero of the drama was to be Saint-Sébastien, "the archer with the hyacinth mane"; that he had always had to give it up because of his inability to find an actor or actress physically adapted to the part, and that only after having seen the incarnation of his dream in the famous Russian actress could he say that he had at last discovered his ideal interpreter. In time he came to identify the interpreter with the interpreted, so that he often gave the actress the name of the saint: he wired to me in Paris, where I had been sent to procure various texts which he needed: "*Ask the bookseller Fleury for that Tertullians which I ordered some time ago, and bring me a basket of fruit for Saint-Sébastien, who is coming here.*"

"*I believe that she lives at the Hôtel Carlton,*" he said when at last he left me. "*We will go there to-morrow morning, and discover the best means of entering into communication with her, as we are not personally acquainted. All I know about her is that she is an exceedingly original woman, very difficult to approach, and that her life is full of mystery. No one has ever seen her in the company of man or woman. I hear that she only leaves her hotel to go to the theatre, or to go for solitary motor drives in the forest of Saint-Cloud or other isolated spots in the vicinity of Paris, where she leaves her car, and walks for an hour or so by herself, before returning to the hotel. At least, so Montesquiou told me, and since he has, as you know, the most ruthless tongue in Christendom, we must take him at his word.*"

He wrung my hand and moved towards the lift, but suddenly, as if seized by remorse for having withheld something, he called me back and whispered the terrible secret in my ear: "*When she leaves Paris she goes lion-hunting in Africa.*" Then he went up to his room.

The following morning I found D'Annunzio, who had already

prepared a note *ad hoc* for Madame Rubinstein, who was staying at the Hôtel Carlton, as we surmised. He read it out to me. It was an extremely correct letter, such as might be written by any famous artist to a famous actress whose personal acquaintance he desires to make.

Ida Rubinstein answered, after a slight delay, in an even more formal tone, and their first meeting took place at the Hôtel Carlton a few days later.

Many years later, with a sort of tardy repentance, Madame Rubinstein wrote about this: "Gabriele D'Annunzio wrote to beg me to receive him *and it goes without saying that I received the Poet surrounded, as he was, by a halo of artistic glory, with profound humility and gratitude.*"

In reality, however, both D'Annunzio and myself found her answer on the frigid side.

Contrary to expectation—given the temperament of D'Annunzio and the charm of the actress—the relationship between the Poet and the artist-cum-big-game-hunter had only an artistic outcome.

D'Annunzio did not inform me whether they had come to any decision with regard to that Saint-Sébastien which had been the starting point of their acquaintanceship, neither did I ask him for any information on the subject. But I soon received indirect proof that D'Annunzio had not renounced his original intention, because he undertook, in my company, a veritable pillaging campaign of all the Paris shops in search of pictures of every epoch or school relating to the saint, picturing him in every possible and imaginable posture and attitude.

Meanwhile the Poet and the actress had met many times, and most probably had discussed their project in detail, D'Annunzio, however, remaining uncommunicative towards me.

Some three weeks later, as I recounted previously, he left for Arcachon, but before his departure he promised solemnly, not to Madame Rubinstein, as might naturally be assumed, but to Madame Simone (ex-actress of the Comédie Française, and wife of Le Bargy, the famous "sociétaire"), a drama entitled *La Hache*, in which Madame Simone was to play the lead.

In spite of my undoubted knowledge of the D'Annunzian mentality, this new and unexpected scheme amazed me, as it

seemed totally opposed to the project of *Saint-Sébastien*. I was even more perplexed when someone in Madame Simone's entourage told me that he had been present at a late conversation between the actress and D'Annunzio. In the course of it the latter had enlarged upon the subject of the new drama with such precision and such a wealth of detail concerning its various ramifications, that the *Hache* seemed already completed in his brain if not yet recorded on paper.

On his arrival at Arcachon the Poet sent me a first letter.

"I still labour under a feeling of painful fatigue. This morning I made a big effort and rode again; then only did I realise that my indisposition was due to lack of exercise."

"My ride gave me two hours of real physical delight. I shall go on riding, and hope soon to regain my strength."

D'Annunzio was not mistaken, because he recovered in a few days his mental and physical balance, thanks to the extraordinary faculty for recuperation of which both his muscles and his brain were capable to a supreme degree. He began a new life, in appearance solely devoted to sports and hygiene. But his distraught manner, his silence and his frequent moments of abstraction proved to me that he was certainly "hatching" something. The text of the frequent telegrams sent at that time to Madame Simone, replete with solemn promises concerning *La Hache*, more than ever fostered the opinion in me that the Poet was about to commence the promised drama, whose plot and entire development he had revealed to me in detail after I had joined him at Arcachon.

Some three weeks later he solemnly announced to me that he had begun to write his new play. "*You know,*" he said, "*I have decided to take up my work once again.*"

"Madame Simone will be pleased," I said.

Do you know what he answered me?

"You mean Madame Rubinstein, because, for your private information, I wish to let you know that I am writing Sébastien."

You may well imagine my surprise!

La Hache was not mentioned again for almost two years.

The drama *La Hache* was later to have its title altered to *Le Chèvrefeuille*, though retaining the same subject. Contrary to

D'Annunzio's affirmations, it was written in Italian, and nearly all translated into French, although under the Poet's daily supervision, by the Marchese di Casafuerte, the friend of D'Annunzio who, to this end, stayed at Arcachon for nearly two months. Finally, the original Italian text, under its third title of *Il Ferro*, was produced in Italy, some time after the performance of the *Chèvrefeuille* at the Théâtre of the Porte Saint-Martin in Paris. A curious detail, but of common occurrence in D'Annunzio's artistic life—the *Chèvrefeuille* was translated, not by Madame Simone, but by Mademoiselle Henriette Roggers with Madame Simone's husband, the actor Le Bargy.

* * * * *

From that day the Poet surrendered himself completely to his work. The house was literally plastered with all the Saints-Sébastien's that have ever been painted, engraved or carved throughout the centuries.

Mounting the stairs, one's eye was met at each step by the "Martyr" riddled with arrows, and "the sight of that pierced breast finally gave one the impression," wrote Gérard d'Houville, "of a planet surrounded by its rays."

When the poet settled at Versailles in order to supervise personally the rehearsals of the tragedy at the Théâtre du Châtelet, he desired that I should send him all the reproductions of the pictures of the Saint which he had left at Arcachon. He wrote: "*Will you detach carefully from the walls of my study all the Saints-Sébastien's, and also the other photographs (from the doors, walls and screens) and kindly send them to me?*"

The Poet worked regularly and indefatigably from ten o'clock at night until the morning, occasionally also during a few hours in the afternoon. After supper—that is between nine and ten—he left the villa alone, or accompanied by some of his favourite greyhounds, and walked about the forests of Moulleau, always carrying a lantern so as not to stumble. Although at that time he received absolutely no one, a considerable amount of correspondence from Paris and Milan (some twenty letters and a dozen wires a day) continued to reach him, although he only read the wires. I had to deal with the rest, with the specific order not to impart to him anything either good or bad, except news of his

mother. If at times he interrupted his work, it was only to send some letter to Madame Rubinstein, the future interpreter of the tragedy.

He wrote to her in January, 1911:

"My beloved frère,

"I have done what I had to do: I have worked. You will find the first and the third acts complete. You will, I am sure, have divined the magnitude of my effort. You will be nailed to the stake, oh, far too beautiful saint! I work every night until the tardy break of dawn. To our speedy meeting. I think of you incessantly, and I love you through the flame of my spirit."

When he made up his mind to take a short trip to Paris, in order to consult her and the painter Bakst, he wrote to her:

"Dear frère,

"All the pierced saints were waiting for the greatest of them, and you did not come! I cannot leave to-night, I do not feel well. The excess and the ardour of work are consuming me. You will find me too pale. I shall leave for Paris to-morrow evening, but shall only remain there a few hours. I kiss your two hands with the most tender melancholy." And he signed underneath, *"The deluded archer."*

Having completed one-half of his poem, he became suddenly possessed of a mania for archery—a notion perhaps suggested to him by the Saint's torture. He sent me to Paris, where there exists to this day near the Porte Saint-Denis a famous manufacturer of bows and arrows, from whom I purchased a dozen bows six feet long with an adequate supply of arrows.

From the day on which I carried them back he amused himself by practising archery in his spare time. When Ida Rubinstein joined him at Arcachon and spent a few days at the Grand Hotel, they used to indulge in veritable competitions at his villa, where she visited him every day.

* * * *

I have said previously that during the composition of his *Saint-Sébastien* the Poet used to send me every day the text which he had composed during the night, usually accompanying it by some notes which contained explanations or comments. Here are some interesting extracts from these brief jottings (I

choose the most significant or curious ones), which I received from him on that occasion and which, as the reader may judge for himself, follow the progress of the work.

"Dear Tom, I am feverish, I believe that I shall finish for to-day and then ring you up. Excuse me."

"I send you all I have got, leaving myself a few pages. To-morrow morning you will have the rest. I hope to have a fruitful night."

" . . . I have only written some sixty verses, but have put down everything that was still vague . . . I prefer not to send you these pages, because I am afraid that I shall still have to make some changes."

" . . . I have finished the act, but I have not yet added the didactics at the end. It is 8 o'clock. It is better for me to go and rest. I am absolutely fagged out."

" . . . It is 7. I cannot go on any longer. It is terribly hard to achieve the proper finale. I send you my best wishes. I hope to finish the third act to-morrow night."

" . . . Dear Tom,

"The scene of La Femme Fille malade de fièvres is so difficult that I have been unable to achieve much. I send you these pages. Have patience. It is 4 o'clock in the morning. I am tired. I am going to bed . . ."

" . . . All I still lack is the brief canticle of Maria, on which I must start with a fresh mind. It is after 7 o'clock. I go to bed. Au revoir till the afternoon."

" . . . I have finished the third act and nearly had a fit afterwards."

" . . . Here is the manuscript; ten or twelve sheets are missing, the last ones. I commend to you the most scrupulous attention, not only in copying it, but also in watching over the manuscript."

He later confessed to me that he often slept with the manuscript of the *Saint-Sébastien* under his pillow.

"I have had to do this," he said, *"because the memory of the fire which destroyed Carlisle's manuscript would not let me sleep."*

" . . . Dear Tom, I believe that I also have deserved Paradise, at least the one foretold for me by Astruc."

(He refers to Gabriel Astruc, impresario of the performances of *Saint-Sébastien* and of his roseate prognostications on the matter of the future box-office receipts.)

" . . . I have finished, as you will see, with a full-throated *pæan*, *Alleluiah*."

When he had finished, whilst still at Arcachon, the *Canzone della gesta d'Oltremare*, he sent me a note (I lived in a house close to his own) written in the following terms: "*It is 6 o'clock. I have finished the last scene. Laus deae!*" A few days before he had written: "*I prefer that you delay our departure until to-morrow. I am afraid that I shall not be ready and I cannot attend to travelling arrangements under such conditions. Every interruption at this moment would endanger my inspiration, and it is better not to forsake certainty for uncertainty.*"

The *Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*, which he began in September, 1910, was finished on February 2nd, 1911. Having recopied the last page and written the word "*Finis*" he gave vent, like a cock, to his crow of victory. To the impresario he wired: "*Work finished. Alleluiah. . . Gabriele D'Annunzio.*"

To Madame Rubinstein, who was at that moment at Petersburg: "*Work finished. I kiss the wounded knees,*" and signed, "*Sanaé.*"

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Thus was born the *Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*, a work in which (as in the conversion scene in the first act) the mystic ecstasy touches peaks which have never been reached by his brother-writers; in which (as in the third act) the most violent and unspeakable passions of the turbid and sinister epoch of the dying empire clash and coalesce with the invincible and victorious splendour of the dawning of Christianity.

In this work, which stands above all others, because written in an idiom which was alien to him, Gabriele D'Annunzio has performed a miracle without precedent and unlikely to be repeated. He created a French masterpiece showing such linguistic virtuosity that it filled with amazement and admiration the greatest French writers of the day: Anatole France and Maurice Barrès.

I could add many other names, foremost among which I would place Robert de Montesquiou, the famous poet, who showed himself so difficult and spiteful in his judgments on his fellow-workers.

As a friend of D'Annunzio's, and as having, so to speak, been sponsor at the artistic nuptials between D'Annunzio and Ida Rubinstein, he was in a position to follow the creation of *Saint-Sébastien*, of which D'Annunzio had given him a few glimpses during his short visits to Paris.

He wrote to me one day:

"It is difficult to foretell the contents of the third and fourth acts, since the whole of the mystical Christian world and the pagan one are represented in their entirety in the second act, which he has just finished. It seems impossible to add anything!"

The work was dedicated by Gabriele D'Annunzio to Maurice Barrès, with the magnificent preface which precedes the *Martyre* and is known to everybody.

"I offer you my Songs of France because, my dear Maurice Barrès, I so love your prose of Italy. This poem, written in the Montaigne country amidst the smell of the pines, I dedicate to you because you yourself found your own most tuneful rhythms at Pisa, at Siena, at Parma, in the sepulchres of Ravenna, in the gardens of Lombardy."

And remembering that he had dared, for the first time, to write a poem in French, he added: *"No one, certainly, will understand, as you will, the rare pleasure I take in my own daring and in the towering risk."*

But even before reading this dedication, Maurice Barrès, the author reputed to be the haughtiest and the most intractable of all French artists, had revealed how greatly delighted he was with the honour which he knew D'Annunzio was preparing for him.

While the book was still in the press he wrote:

"MY DEAR D'ANNUNZIO,

"I am dreaming of this still unknown book, with which you are honouring me by linking my name, of this inspired companion with whom I shall dwell among all wise men and all foolish women. Thank you for the honour and for the friendship. No order of the Golden Fleece, no Garter any King can bestow could equal what you, dear and noble poet, are good enough to do for your grateful admirer.

"MAURICE BARRÈS.

"March 31st, 1911."

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When one remembers that, at that very moment, the snarling curs of Italy were snapping, with derision, contempt and mockery at the heels of this man, who, on foreign soil, was so brilliantly holding aloft the pennon of Italian genius, one wonders in truth why, when it included envy among the mortal sins, the Christian religion should not have included imbecility as well.

CHAPTER XIV

D'ANNUNZIO AND THE UNKNOWNABLE

Satan or champion of the Faith?—A complete agnostic—The Poet entertains a Saint—Disagreement between an Archbishop and a Bishop—The Apocryphæ—D'Annunzio and St. Francis of Assisi—An adventure in the Cathedral of Fribourg—D'Annunzio as an ecclesiastical correspondent—A Dominican sermon and the lovely penitents—Vera Sergine and the Shroud—D'Annunzio and the venerable Patriarch—The indulgence of a poetically-minded Pope and the severity of the Holy Congregation—Lucrezia Borgia's golden tresses—The Poet's spiritualism—A woman who practises witchcraft—The waxen figure

THERE are many who have wished to see in D'Annunzio a diabolic corrupter of consciences, a sort of incarnation of Lucifer—in a word, a veritable scourge of morality.

Others, on the contrary, judging him by the mystical and religious tendency of some of his works, have looked upon him, if not as an actual champion of the Faith, at least as a great sinner who has repented and been converted.

Very few, so far as I know, have come to the far simpler conclusion that D'Annunzio is, at heart, perfectly indifferent to every religious problem or religious question, and that the mystic gleams which appear here and there in his writings spring not from any warmth of religious conviction of a transitory character but from a source exclusively artistic.

This conclusion, nevertheless, is the right one. The dizzy religious heights which, in the fervour of his own creation, D'Annunzio has sometimes reached—as, for instance, in certain pages of *Saint-Sébastien*—only bear out this contention.

D'Annunzio is, in reality, the most perfect and the purest agnostic that ever lived. I say the “purest” intentionally, an agnostic being one who affirms that the problems concerning the origins, the substance and the end of matter are inaccessible to the human mind. The pure agnostic is very careful to steer clear of the dogma which Denys Cochin has described as “necessary ignorance,” thereby showing that he is indifferent (if the play on

the words may be forgiven) even to the philosophic theory of indifference.

Existence of God? Immortality of the soul? Problem of the beyond?

Who has ever heard D'Annunzio seriously discuss these questions? And yet he has not only experienced all human disillusionments, but his acute mind has studied, dissected, analysed and described them. He has devoted long and frequent periods of his life to solitude and seclusion, under conditions particularly favourable to meditation, concentration and detachment from worldly things. Death has been close to him a hundred times, brushing him with her wings both in times of peace and of war. And what, from a religious point of view, has been the result for his soul? Nil!

It has brought about not the smallest modification in his attitude, from which we can deduce that "The Unknowable," for all his intellectual questing, awakened no curiosity in D'Annunzio. The problem of The Unknowable, which has worn out the greatest minds of humanity, would not seem to have ever seriously interested the Poet, and as a proof of this I would advance the complete absence from his library of any books that deal with the subject. If any books such as Maurice Maeterlinck's *Death* be found there, it will be only that they were presents from the author, or that they formed part of collections purchased at a sale. On the other hand, for years, and especially in the period following the war, D'Annunzio continuously wrote and spoke of his professed desire for death. At the age of sixteen he expressed himself as follows in the company of friends who were discussing suicide: "*Many kill themselves to escape life, no one kills himself to escape death. This means that death is less insufferable than life.*" Fifty years later, in 1929, he wrote: "*May I be spared from experiencing the ignominy of illness, the burden of old age, the shame of withered flesh, outliving the dead and shrunken spirit.*"

I may mention here that he alluded to it in conversation whenever occasion offers—if, for example, he is told of a death, particularly if it is the death of someone dear to him, though in general he needs no such excuse to revert to the subject. In his writings he is absolutely obsessed with the thought of death, and

all his later books are, directly or indirectly, concerned with it.

It is as though he wished to create the impression of a man henceforward completely detached from life and longing for dissolution; like a saint who, despising all earthly possessions, asks only that life, with its suspense and tribulations, shall end, so that he may attain to perfect and eternal felicity.

How can such an attitude on the part of our hero be reconciled with the fact that he never alludes to the possibility of existence after death, but seems, on the contrary, in all his acts, to attach extreme importance to carnal satisfaction, guided by the motto: "*Post mortem nulla voluptas*"?

What philosophy or religious conviction does he conceal in the depths of his soul? Is it that of the epicure, the stoic, the believer or the sceptic? Or should we, seeking in philosophic or religious doctrine the cause of this preoccupation with death, not simply conclude that it results from a certain weariness of life combined with an invincible horror of old age? I put forward this hypothesis the more boldly because it seems to me to be corroborated by the fact that D'Annunzio does not confine himself to declaring that he desired death, but is always careful to add that it must be a beautiful death, which, to him, means a passing in full and glorious possession of all his faculties of body and mind, *not* a passing comforted by faith. If I mistake not, such a preoccupation never disturbed the dreams of Epicurus, Zeno, Aristides or St. Augustine.

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One day Fate put in his path, which might finally have become that to Damascus, a deeply religious man, Adolphe Bermond. This excellent man came under the spell of D'Annunzio, and conceived an immense sympathy for him, considering him as a great intellectual who had fallen into error, and whom he was called to set again on the strait and narrow road. When their acquaintanceship had lasted a year, Adolphe Bermond died, so to speak, in D'Annunzio's arms, invoking divine light on his behalf. All this went to form the subject of *Contemplazione della Morte*.

I must give room here to an observation which I consider

extraordinarily interesting if we desire to arrive at a complete comprehension of the D'Annunzian psychology.

What was Adolphe Bermond in real life, not in that remote one created by D'Annunzio's genius? He was a true saint—if not in the strictly canonic sense of the word, yet a good and worthy man, such as can be found in every country, whose edifying and moving Christian death inspired D'Annunzio to create a masterpiece.

I cannot imitate the Maréchal de Villeroy, who refused to believe that François de Sales had been canonised by the Church for the simple reason that he had dined with him on innumerable occasions. Yet without reaching this excess of incredulity, and as, in the present case, we are not dealing with a saint officially recognised by the Church, I shall describe Adolphe Bermond to you as he actually was, because I knew him even better than did D'Annunzio and saw him far more often.

Adolphe Bermond was a typical Bordeaux patriarch, not so much in his looks—for at eighty he was a little old man full of the joy of living—as becomes the father of fourteen sons. He was, moreover, D'Annunzio's landlord at Arcachon, by which I mean the owner of the Chalet Saint-Dominique, in which D'Annunzio spent the five years of his exile—*"the affable and devoted stranger to whom I was indebted for the peaceful abode on the dunes,"* to quote the Poet.

My first contact with Adolphe Bermond arose from the payment of the rent which we had deferred, according to D'Annunzian custom. He who was to die in such a saintly manner was in everyday life a practical business man, intractable where money was concerned; in this, akin to all house-owners, however fervent followers of Christ they may be.

On these occasions (I am speaking in the plural because, as the reader will easily believe, our remissness on rent-day was to be an oftentimes-repeated event) he used to question me closely with regard to his famous tenant whom he only knew by reputation, and who, though unimpeachable from a literary point of view, left much to be desired from the moral one. The exiled Poet passed for a corrupter of souls, and in the eyes of all practising Catholics his books were the works of Satan.

Adolphe Bermond unbosomed his doubts to me. He disliked the idea of losing a client, the more so as he was a world-famed artist, yet, on the other hand, he was not particularly keen to shelter a reprobate in a house which he had placed under the protection of Saint-Dominique. I comforted him by describing to him the true D'Annunzio, with all his faults but also with his infinite kindness, his honesty, his sweetness of disposition, and his love for his neighbour. He parted from me greatly comforted, and expressed a wish to make D'Annunzio's acquaintance. And so it came about that one day I took him to see the Poet and left him in his hands. The inevitable happened. "*Serene and free from undue scruples, he did not doubt my sincerity or my purity,*" D'Annunzio wrote later. "*Though a fervent Catholic, addicted to all the devotional practices of his religion, he remained unperturbed and free from any moral scruples. He sensed a flame burning in my heart and that was enough for him. He could not imagine a poet without a God, or that God, any but his own.*" Finally, Adolphe Bermond, like everyone else, succumbed to the extreme personal fascination of D'Annunzio, who has always known so perfectly how to conquer even the most recalcitrant by adapting his own intelligence and spirit to theirs.

After four or five visits to his tenant, Adolphe Bermond, who, with the persistency common to fervent addicts of the Faith, had succeeded in wresting from D'Annunzio the avowal that he had not approached the Sacraments from time immemorial, began to implore him to go to Confession and Holy Communion. D'Annunzio evaded the issue, comforting the old man with kind words and vague promises, asking him to bear with him awhile. In fact, he displayed himself on this occasion as the man he always was, that is, neither devout nor a believer, in the true sense of the word, but, on the other hand, one incapable of despising or ridiculing religious things.

They met a few times more; then, when a few months had gone by, Adolphe Bermond fell dangerously ill. As I have mentioned before, he had passed his eightieth year and the end was near. Before dying he expressed a wish to see D'Annunzio, upon whom he looked as his spiritual ward. D'Annunzio lovingly acceded to his request. During his last days and up to his very death agony he spent long hours at the bedside of the

dying man, who kept his hands clasped between his own, as though to invoke divine grace upon him.

It is certain that D'Annunzio had never before found himself in a situation more favourable, materially and spiritually, to a recrudescence of that faith in which he was born and which, as a child, he probably accepted.

However, what was the only result of this concourse of favourable circumstances? A wonderful book of poetic and pathetic beauty, entitled *Contemplazione della Morte*. So far we may agree, but the real and effective contemplation of that mystic death, which in the soul of the *artist* D'Annunzio inspired pages bearing the imprint of great turmoil of soul, only provoked in the *man* D'Annunzio a penetrating, dry, and insatiate curiosity; a curiosity awakened by an entirely novel spectacle. We are, therefore, left in doubt as to whether D'Annunzio, even for a moment, actually saw the dying friend surrounded by an aureole of sanctity, or whether he *wished* to see him so because it suited his artistic purpose.

But there is more to this. This incomparable artist and creator, even when describing the last moments of Bermond's life, was unable to resist the temptation to invent a queer detail (it must certainly have escaped the majority of my readers, or have at least appeared obscure to them) which refers to a mystical passage in the Gospel of St. Mark, a favourite passage of D'Annunzio's because of its curious double meaning. In describing the arrest of Christ, the Gospel of St. Mark says: "And a certain young man followed Him, having a linen cloth cast about him, over his naked body: and they laid hold on him; but he left the linen cloth and fled naked."

This is what D'Annunzio says in the *Contemplazione della Morte*: "*Seeing a light flash unexpectedly across the wall, I got up . . . turned round and went out. My action was so rapid that no one followed me except a young man . . . I could feel him trembling while he opened the door leading to the sandy path. I did not hear the creaking of the hinge behind me as I was walking away, and I thought that he had remained on the threshold watching me go. I did not turn round. It seemed to me that a new face had been born of my spirit. A revealing image of the youth of Christ's shroud struck at my heart.*"

I have quoted these two passages to show that even the strongest emotion can never induce D'Annunzio to give up his love of artistic detail. I shall quote further instances of this tendency when, describing the sufferings of the poor in Fiume during the period when this city was brought close to famine (through the action of the Minister Nitti, who cut off all railway and maritime communications, thus isolating it from the rest of the world), D'Annunzio wrote: "*The other day one of them wished to kiss my hand, and as I motioned him off he fell to his knees. Then I, too, knelt down in front of him, and thus for a short while we remained face to face, like twin donors on an ancient triptych.*"

With his passion for everything mystical and rare, D'Annunzio fills his library with books on the *apocryphal gospels*. For instance, the legend which concerns the apostle Didymus (St. Thomas) in the *Saint-Sébastien* is drawn from the Coptic apocryphal gospel.

All this is very touching, but it does not tend to prove the existence of faith in D'Annunzio. The truth is that he has never been a believer. There cannot be the slightest doubt upon this point, any more than there can be doubt that his cult for St. Francis of Assisi, of which he so loudly boasts, is no more than the shadow of a religious sentiment.

It is probable that the constant habit of drawing some undefined parallel between himself and the Saint of Assisi began by being a very modest seed in D'Annunzio's soul, but, like everything else that concerns him, it rapidly assumed gigantic proportions, so that in the end it has become a sort of fixed idea.

We must look for an explanation in that *state of poverty* in which he has so often found himself, and which, as we have seen in a previous chapter, he has persisted in raising to the rank of a *cult of poverty*. There must have been a time when D'Annunzio enjoyed turning it into a jest. It is consistent with his mentality to pass by easy stages to that final attitude when he sees himself, in all faith, as a follower and a disciple of St. Francis. It is this attitude of mind which allows him to fluctuate so perpetually between a tragic and a frivolous conception of life.

True, one may find remarkable analogies between D'Annunzio and Francis of Assisi. Tomaso da Celano (the biographer of the Saint) recounts that "St. Francis used to sing French and Provençal songs; he had a predilection for elegant and sumptuous apparel, which he caused to be fashioned in queer modes and colours in order better to attract the eyes of the public; that he had a passion for tournaments, hunts, jousts, and banquets; that he liked exquisite and rare viands; that he fought as a hero in the plain between Assisi and Perugia; that he was the enemy of vileness; that at the storming of the 'Rocca di Narni' he was the first to scale the ramparts . . ." Has not D'Annunzio done likewise in peace and in war? Does he not sing in French, clothe himself in fine raiment? Did he not continually provoke the admiration and curiosity of the public? Is he not a lover of fine living? Was he not among the first in the storming of Veliki? Has he not always been brave in war and the enemy of everything that is vile? Surely there is no one who would dare contest his possession of these virtues and these defects.

But this Life of Francis, as represented by Tomaso da Celano, is not the life of the real St. Francis of Assisi: it is that of the son of Pietro Bernardone, a rich merchant of Assisi, the life which Francis, once he had become a saint, denied, abhorred and wished to forget, that he might celebrate the more worthily his mystic nuptials with Sister Poverty.

On these lines, all the libertines and the materialists of the world could proclaim themselves followers of St. Augustine—that is, of St. Augustine in his youth—and all bricklayers and schoolmasters claim kinship with Mussolini, for no other reason than that, in early youth, the Duce was a mason and a teacher of French!

Besides, I do not believe that D'Annunzio ever thinks for a moment of that period of the Saint's life to which I have alluded, when he compares himself to the latter with a brazenness and a lack of proportion which exceeds all limits and seems incredible on the part of a man of taste. Did he not give the name of "Porziuncula" to Eleonora Duse's small villa at Settignano, where he used to join her, a passionate lover? How can he have compared the spiritual intercourse between St. Clare and St. Francis, solely intent on expounding

all things pertaining to God, to his amorous relations with the great actress?

Does he not often inform his guests, during meals, that he wears a Franciscan girdle under his evening clothes (which, by the way, is not even true)? Does he not wear in the house dressing-gowns which recalled the Franciscan habit, and yet revealed his favourite vest of mauve silk? Did he not at one stage make women call him "Brother Fire"?

Truly if we were not dealing with Gabriele D'Annunzio, a great artist and a heroic soldier whose eccentricities it is patriotic to overlook, we should have to ask ourselves whether it is permissible to allow him to laugh so heartily at the expense of his credulous fellow-men.

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I must establish one point, namely, that when he speaks of renunciation, maceration, of the imitation of Christ, of despising all things earthly and of his desire for the peace of the cloister, this talk is merely the fruit of his perfervid imagination. He is encouraged in it by the equally fervid credulity of his followers; in the absence of direct proof they are forced to accept every kind of story concerning the life of their idol, and they are particularly misled on this point, not only by his own assertions but by certain religious touches which, when they have the good fortune to visit it, they find in his house. Yet, if they used their judgment, they would notice that, just as genuine works of art and objects of real value stand side by side with others of much more doubtful character, so the most honoured statues and the most austere texts mingle with erotic pictures and equivocal inscriptions.

His soul, in fact, is always pagan and profoundly impure, and even his emotions are essentially profane.

It is true that we can see in this hybrid and sacrilegious assortment rather the insatiable ardour of the collector and the unquenchable curiosity of the artist than a morbid pleasure in irreverence and audacious contrasts. Nevertheless, they tend to prove once more, if this be necessary, that the Poet absolutely lacks not only a sentiment of true religion, but even that innate deference which is commonly shown to representations and tokens of divinity.

D'Annunzio's life, as well as his work, provides numberless and eloquent examples of his almost systematic habit of mixing casually, and even complacently, the sacred with the profane. And there are many cases in point.

But if there are times when D'Annunzio's apparently irreligious acts are merely incidental, there are others when he shows that he undertakes them of set purpose and intent.

One day while he thus waited for a woman, hiding himself discreetly behind the pillar of a Roman church, he had the odd experience of hearing the Novena, which, at the recommendation of the metropolitan clergy, was being recited by the faithful in all the Roman churches, for protection against the *immoral work* of Gabriele D'Annunzio.

Many years later, during his travels in Switzerland, upon which I accompanied him, he left me at Berne (where I understood that I was to await him until the following day) and proceeded by himself to Fribourg, where he was to meet his lawyer in order to discuss an interesting matter to which I shall refer later.

After a few hours he telephoned to me from Fribourg, informing me that he would stay there for dinner and overnight, and that, if I wished, I could meet him at a little restaurant some way out of the city.

I left in the afternoon and reached Fribourg at about ten at night. I went at once to the rendezvous, but was told that a gentleman, whose appearance corresponded to that of D'Annunzio, had dined there in company with two beautiful ladies, but that they had left by motor half an hour earlier.

Uncertain where to go—the more so as the unexpected news given me by the waiter of the Poet's having been seen in the company of *two* ladies, instead of *one*, left me still more perplexed as to my next move—I retraced my steps and found myself in the middle of the town, which, at that hour, was almost deserted.

By chance, I fell in with a nocturnal reveller of Fribourg (bed-time in Fribourg is nine o'clock, or thereabouts), who took an interest in my search. After briefly questioning the Cathedral porters, who were about to lock up for the night, my companion was able to assert with some confidence that a foreign-looking

gentleman with a pointed beard, accompanied by two elegant ladies, had been seen to enter the Cathedral a few minutes before, and that he was still there, listening to the famous organist whose name was a byword in all the cantons of the Swiss confederation.

Acting upon this information, I finally discovered D'Annunzio in a dark nave, seated on a bench between two ladies, listening with beatitude to a composition of Bach, which was being played in magnificent style.

I subsequently learnt from one of his beautiful companions (they were a divorcee and her sister) that, by continued insistence, and through the good offices of the restaurant owner, who was a relation of the organist, D'Annunzio had obtained the favour of a special performance at that unusual hour. But I also learnt from the same charming source that the Poet, perhaps carried away by musical ecstasy, had shown himself so ardent in his love-making during the recital of the famous organist that he had put the indulgence of his two fair companions to a severe test.

In more recent times—I am referring now to 1913—the Poet, still enamoured of liturgical music, invited a number of beautiful society ladies to listen to a famous organist, this time no less a personage than the celebrated organist of Notre-Dame, taking it upon himself to escort them. D'Annunzio's entry into the principal church in Paris, in the company of a bevy of beautiful and elegant sinners, did not pass unnoticed, and I am sure that if the Cardinal Archbishop, Monseigneur Amette, did not oppose his entry, it was only because he was taken unawares. Otherwise he would certainly have repeated St. Ambrose's treatment of the Emperor Theodosius. In fact, various Catholic newspapers took up the matter a few days later, and, evidently inspired by the ecclesiastical authorities, stigmatised D'Annunzio's behaviour in no uncertain terms.

At the time, the report of this episode went the round of all the drawing-rooms in Paris.

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Even in early youth D'Annunzio gave conclusive proof of a want of comprehension which allowed him to see and describe

religious seasons and observances from an exclusively profane point of view. He thus wrote in 1886, a few days after Christmas:

"The mornings of the days preceding Christmas are eminently erotic; you can awaken in the woman you love grave and tender feelings, you can appeal to that sentimentality which in those Christian days fills all feminine souls."

But let us now follow him step by step in his description of the Church of St. Louis during the sermons of a famous Lenten preacher, Père Le Méhauté.

D'Annunzio passed from the nave into the aisles studying the sinners, male and female—the latter with particular attention—who had crowded the church to hear the famous preacher.

What was the first thing that struck him?

"Under the richly-carved pulpit fifteen or sixteen ladies, forty to fifty years of age, with hair just growing grey, and dressed all in black as if in mourning. It is to these that Père Le Méhauté addresses his most honeyed words. Behind them worthy middle-class matrons accompanied by youthful daughters, who make great pretence of reading their prayer books, yet from time to time throw rapid glances right and left, coughing discreetly but affectedly and passing a handkerchief over their lips. Among them is one girl, tall and slim, dressed in black. She off-handedly carries on an idyllic flirtation, twists herself round every time she hears the door opening, and postures languidly."

"Another girl enters with her governess. She is very pale, with brown hair and very long eyelashes. She neither lifts her eyes from her book nor looks anyone in the face. She appears to be an impassioned lover of Jesus, tortured by an unquenchable thirst for divine love. At moments when some sharper peal comes from the organ she trembles, presses her book almost convulsively between her fingers, and lets her head droop upon her breast. At other moments she seems shaken by spasms of pain, shuts her book and remains motionless, her arms taut by her sides, as though resisting the pain of some piercing dagger-thrust. God! What ghastly sins can this child have committed that she should suffer so atrociously?"

Let us now follow D'Annunzio's reflections as he goes into another aisle.

"This aisle," he tells us, "is occupied almost entirely by lovers. They come in with a hesitating step and a half-smile on their lips."

They look around, and having found the beloved of their heart, they carefully select their own seat. Their whole attention is directed to so placing themselves that they can look at the object of their passion without attracting the notice of her mother or her neighbour.

"As soon as some fortunate gap between the heads of the faithful, or between the pillars and pews, has allowed the achievement of this purpose, ocular telegraphy begins and lasts as long as the sermon itself.

"Those, however, who are merely seeking adventure cannot keep still. They change their seats every moment, their eyes fixed on the doors in the hope of finding someone who will engage their fancy. They will go to any extreme to attract the notice of the one they hope to ensnare: they blow their noses a dozen times, they drop their umbrellas, cough, ostentatiously button and unbutton their coats, shuffle their feet, sigh, avail themselves of a thousand artifices to obtain a responsive glance. And so . . . alas! . . . another woman is betrayed."

Finally, what caught D'Annunzio's special attention in the third aisle?

"Two girls in friendly proximity; in the shadow of a confessional. They are kneeling, their elbows touching; from time to time they sway towards each other, and the fair ringlets of the one touch gently the brown locks of the other. The hair of the one is the colour of tea, cool in a 'Chine rose' bowl, and the hair of the other like coffee, steaming in a cup of dark-blue Saxe . . .

"And I tell you, readers, that on the Thursday of the Annunciation, while a tenor was singing to an organ accompaniment a melody full of heavenly passion, I saw one of these sinful girls take her friend's hand and press it to her lips with such an ardour of desire that I half expected the Cherubim to drop their tinsel-paper skirts, and fly away, shrieking in holy horror."

If, encouraged by the details just quoted, we wished to go further and ascertain the impression made on him by the famous Père Le Méhauté, we should be disappointed, for D'Annunzio did not hesitate to refer to his eloquence as tepid and obscure.

Easter fell a few days later. D'Annunzio consecrated it to the Basilica of St. Peter. What did he see there?

"Women who wear black dresses of a studied simplicity, enhancing

the slender grace of their bodies; some hide their faces behind web-like veils through which their eyes shine with insidious languor. Some use a pungent and provocative perfume, which trails behind them even after they have passed. They walk slowly, pausing at every step, talking about mundane matters, attracting men's glances, brimming over with the happiness of being followed and admired. They drag their worldly love into the house of God Almighty."

When he came to this passage, it looked as though even D'Annunzio had been scandalised by such irreverence.

But how weak and ambiguous and—I would almost say—earthly is the cry which breaks from the depths of his heart.

"Oh, my God, supreme truth and supreme beneficence, turn their eyes from the ugliness with which they are surrounded! Fill their minds with thoughts and images that incline them towards Thyself!"

Should we attach any faith to his invocation? I am inclined to doubt it; and I believe that I am right, because a few lines further on, after having solemnly declared that, in order to fly from temptation which he did not feel strong enough to resist, he left the church, he writes as follows: *"The steps are crowded with women who blink a little, dazzled by the sudden glare of the sunlight. An irresistible softness falls from the spring sky."*

In the heat of the summer D'Annunzio is an assiduous frequenter of churches, but in a series of articles which he once wrote for the newspapers he confesses the reason with great candour: *"Catholicism is a good religion for the summer, and the Catholic religion without doubt thirsts for Rome. That is why æstival Catholicism has found such inexhaustible freshness in this city."*

He entitled these notes *"Ecclesiastical Chronicles,"* and we can only hope that the title is ironical.

* * * * *

At times an act which to us may seem irreverent is neither foreseen nor intentional on D'Annunzio's part. For instance, here is an incident that happened during the performances of *Saint-Sébastien* in Paris.

My readers are certainly aware that one of the chief figures of this tragedy is an enigmatic neophyte known in the tragedy under the name of *La Femme fille malade de fièvres*. The

French actress, Vera Sergine, was chosen by the author to interpret this part.

In the second act *La Femme fille malade de fièvres* shows to a crowd of slaves and neophytes the Holy Shroud, which, according to the poem, is supposed to have been brought to her from the confines of the world by an eagle, and the Christian girl jealously hides it against her heart.

The sacred relic, with the aid of the slaves, is produced and presented to the ecstatic glances of the first Christians.

In order that the audience might understand the meaning of this scene, it was necessary that a faint drawing of the Face of the Redeemer should appear in the middle of the veil.

D'Annunzio wished to sketch the "Ineffable Presentment" himself, and, with his usual all-embracing mastery, rapidly carried out this undertaking.

The performances of *Saint-Sébastien* took place, and the veil representing the sacred relic was carefully folded and put away every night, but when they came to an end Vera Sergine insisted on keeping it in token of remembrance of her rôle in the tragedy. She based this claim on the fact that the veil belonged to her, a circumstance of which D'Annunzio was fully informed.

It would be excessive to talk of sacrilege in such a case, but, on the other hand, I am convinced that the majority of people would have refrained from making difficulties over the matter and simply tried to replace it. It was therefore a mere display of feminine sensibility which the mind of D'Annunzio was unable to comprehend.

Mocking fate intervened to settle everything for the best, preventing Cæsar from laying hands on that which was not Cæsar's. An ignorant chambermaid who had only been a short time in the service of the famous actress, failing to understand the significance of the curious effigy, and thinking that the veil had merely been stained, calmly sent it to the laundry with the rest of the washing, and the only consolation that remained to Vera Sergine was to bemoan the loss of the pseudo-relic, to which she attached so much importance.

* * * * *

Notwithstanding what I have just said, D'Annunzio—and

this is one of the innumerable contradictions of his mentality—has always shown himself very respectful of the external forms of worship and religion.

I have never heard a blasphemy pass his lips. If he has to assist at an official mass or at some church celebration, he not only behaves extremely correctly, but with a contemplative attention edifying to all those present.

It remains, of course, to inquire whether D'Annunzio's appearance of mental withdrawal, when he chances on such occasions to find himself in a church, corresponds to any analogous spiritual state. An episode which I personally witnessed seems to prove the contrary.

I was accompanying him one day, in my capacity as A.D.C., to a religious celebration which was taking place in the Cathedral of Fiume. On the way we had been discussing a new editorial contract, as well as the financial advantages which he might obtain from certain clauses which I had ventured to lay before him.

He showed himself non-committal, and his silence lasted until we had entered the cathedral, where he remained for about an hour, kneeling with his head between his hands. After the ceremony we met at the exit, and when we were once more in the car he said to me, with a simplicity which was the natural outcome of long meditation of the subject: "*The clauses which you propose are inadequate, you must exact the insertion of the following . . .*" upon which he proceeded to enumerate them. The reader can deduce from this how little either the liturgical chant or the scent of incense had troubled the reflections of this business man.

Generally speaking, the personal relations between D'Annunzio and both the higher and the lower hierarchy of the Church have been extremely cordial on the one side and extremely deferential on the other.

Not only has he no prejudice against the representatives of religion, but, on the contrary, he always professes the greatest deference with regard to them. He has never been a freemason, and is temperamentally unfitted to become one. A supporter and apostle of ultra-individualism, he always smiles at the idea of belonging to coteries and sects. One of his favourite mottoes,

"Who shall keep me chained?" has as logical and coherent an application in the religious domain as in that of love and friendship.

In Venice, in 1917, D'Annunzio had the opportunity of being presented by Count Piero Foscari to the Cardinal Lafontaine, Patriarch of Venice.

The Patriarch showed himself very gracious towards the Poet, and the latter spoke so respectfully of religion to the eminent prelate that Monseigneur Lafontaine was not only greatly pleased but expressed his regret at having composed many years before "an acid and unpleasant poem" (they are the Cardinal's own words), to which, as he said, he had been provoked by reading some verses of the *Laus Vitæ*, which he considered irreverent.

D'Annunzio has always been kind and generous to the priests of all the Italian and foreign localities where he stayed, and no one has ever appealed to him in vain for a charitable purpose. At Settignano as well as at Arcachon and at Gardone, the Poet has always spent lavishly for the benefit of the Church and the poor.

When we now ascend to the summit of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, we shall see that even with the Popes his relationship, as a private individual as well as a writer (tolerated or put on the Index by fits and starts, according to the instructions of the Sacred Congregation of the Index), has always been conducted, on D'Annunzio's part, with the deepest respect, and on that of several of the Supreme Pontiffs with undoubted kindness and, if I may be allowed to say so, with something of veiled sympathy. One of the Popes of whom this may be said was Leo XIII.

A short while before his meeting with Leo XIII D'Annunzio had published *Il Piacere*, and the literary dovescots of the whole world were in a state of fluttering perturbation. The author and his work formed the only subjects of conversation.

It was natural that the Vatican should also have interested itself in the question, and discussion was rampant as to whether it would not be an opportune gesture to place D'Annunzio on the Index as the author of a book which was so controversial from a moral point of view.

D'Annunzio used at that time to visit a friend, a famous

ceramist, who was then working in the apartment of the Borgias at the Vatican, repairing the mosaics of the pavement. We often used to lunch with him at the Tavern of the Swiss Guards. One day Pope Leo XIII happened to pass by, and noticing a stranger sitting at the side of the ceramist amongst his Guards, asked who he was. The ceramist told him the name of the Poet and presented him to His Holiness. The Pope stopped and conversed affably with D'Annunzio for a few moments. D'Annunzio was so enchanted with the culture and kindliness of the Pope that, finding himself in Paris a few months later, he published in the *Figaro* an enthusiastic and erudite article on the Latin poetry of the Pontiff, who, as is known, was a great humanist.

This article was brought to the notice of Leo XIII, who showed himself grateful for it—so grateful, indeed, that one day a prelate, having spoken in his presence of the advisability of putting D'Annunzio on the Index, Leo XIII answered in round terms: "Leave him alone; he is the only man living who can write Italian." Benedict XV also recognised the artistic gifts of D'Annunzio, but, less artistically-minded than Leo XIII and more circumspect and caustic, he expressed himself one day about the Poet in a rather different way.

The occasion arose during the audience granted by the Pope to the famous Spanish writer and journalist, Gómez Carillo, a good friend of mine, who recounted this episode to me on the same day, immediately upon his return from the Vatican. It was in May 1915, and Gómez Carillo, an ardent partisan of Italian intervention, who had followed D'Annunzio from Paris to Quarto and from Quarto to Rome, speaking of the political situation to the Pope, was unable to conceal his personal enthusiasm for the Poet, who was also his friend. Pope Benedict allowed him to have his say, and then, placing his hand on his shoulder with a familiar gesture, remarked placidly: "My son, I wouldn't exalt him too much if I were you."

With regard to the relations between Pius XI and the Poet, it is well known that they were far from being cordial. Everybody is acquainted with the fact that the Pontiff forbade the faithful to buy the *Opera Omnia*, and that D'Annunzio retaliated with a brief letter, published in the papers, in which he gave

a free rein to his ironical comments regarding the fact that the austere Pontiff, when librarian of the Ambrosian Library at Milan, was at the same time the legitimate custodian of the golden tresses of Lucrezia Borgia.

This was perhaps the first time that D'Annunzio showed himself wounded by the harsh words of the Pope, because up to that day he had appeared absolutely impervious to anathema.

One of the best proofs of this indifference was given by the measured and respectful defence which he published in the Parisian press of his *Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*, following on the harsh interdict which emanated from Cardinal Amette, Archbishop of Paris, forbidding Catholics to attend the performances of the tragedy which were then taking place at the Théâtre du Châtelet. This letter, of a lofty character, was likewise signed by the musician, Claude Debussy.

It would be rather strange if, in the course of his long life, D'Annunzio had not at some time or other been attracted by spiritism; in fact, he practised it, but in a very superficial manner, during the months in 1907 when he acted as host to his friend, the Marquis Clemente Origo, who was a fervent adept of spiritualism.

I am inclined to think, however, that the Poet never took spiritualistic séances very seriously, and that he regarded them, both in Paris and in the other places where he took part in them, merely as a pleasant occasion for sitting in the dark close to charming women, excited by the mystery of such performances.

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It is known that D'Annunzio has also been accused (and of what crimes has he *not* been accused?) of saturnism, of black magic and of diabolical and occult practices.

In reality D'Annunzio has always been a little superstitious. But (it is with deep regret that I must shatter the illusions of so many feminine admirers of D'Annunzio) I have not the courage to represent him as a follower of Gilles de Raies, the famous Bluebeard of history, or of the Marquis de Sade, whose memory flourishes to this day.

The occult sciences have always had a great interest for him, but at heart he has never taken them seriously, though he allows

the contrary to be generally believed. He feels that a diabolical halo might be of use to him, especially in his dealings with the fair sex—always athirst for everything sinful and mysterious.

Once only have I had occasion to be present with him at the practice of "involtura," in which he seemed to take an active part, although he did not relinquish for a moment his inner attitude of incurable scepticism. This exhibition of sorcery took place in Rome on the night of the 20th of June, 1915. The participants were D'Annunzio and the Marchioness Louisa C. A well-known soothsayer was officiating: at that time he told fortunes in the drawing-rooms and embassies of Rome, and his pockets were filled with very expensive amulets which he described as coming from the Orient, though, in point of fact, they were manufactured by the dozen in Via Margutta by the Countess P. . . . The mediæval ceremony of the *envoûtement* (for the information of anyone unacquainted with it) consists of the sacrilegious parody of the baptism of a wax figure, representing the person you wish to strike or to kill. The effigy is then transfixed by a pin, in the exact place where it is desired that the individual whom it represents shall suffer mortal injury. This charming practice was in great vogue at the time of Louis XIV.

The curious ceremony took place in front of the tomb of the Horaces and the Curiac in the Via Appia, consistently with tradition, at the tolling of midnight.

No particulars of the satanic rite were omitted, in order that the magical experiment should have the malignant effect that was desired.

Personally I confess that I did not greatly fear for the intended victim, whose effigy had been mutilated, although the chosen time and place, the suggestion of eternal night and the serious expression on the faces of the participants conferred a certain funereal solemnity on the ceremony which was far from diverting on its own merits.

By the way, although eighteen years have passed since then, the intended victim is still safe and sound, nor has he ever felt any ill consequences from the sorcery, of which he remains in ignorance to this day.

The curious and bold poem in blank verse which D'Annunzio

wrote in French, entitled *La Figure de Cire*, remains as a testimony to this episode. Only two copies of it are still in existence, one of which is in the hands of the Marchioness C. . . . The original was destroyed by the author.

Was it because he disliked the idea of reading it again? I hardly think so.

Did he intend to deny its authorship? This is still more unlikely.

From his youth upwards, D'Annunzio has never repudiated anything which he wrote, apart from the verses dedicated to his grandmother, which he considered extremely poor from a literary point of view.

Did he experience doubt or remorse, and if so, of what nature? Certainly neither religious nor moral. That, I feel sure, I can affirm with the most absolute certainty.

CHAPTER XV

D'ANNUNZIO'S GREAT AMOURS

Convicted of adultery—A planned affair—The bow of Eleonora Duse—Marriage of convenience—"Remember the 10th of April"—A questionable romance—The two lovers and the *Song of Songs*—Duse and the rondeaux—The divine one who vanished—A Carmelite in the snow—Niké, the fearless Amazon—Steeds and a Persian rug—A divorce that never materialised—Isabella Inghirami—The inferno of a mistress—Leisurely days at Arcachon—The twilight of Donatella—The sweet illusions of a Parisienne—"Il est cocu"—The Poet's unique idyll—"Eyes of silence and melancholy"

TIME influences and attenuates our standard of values. Yet when we have to deal with D'Annunzio's relations with women, the intervening years do not rid us of a fear that we may be indelicate, if not indiscreet.

However, we can argue convincingly that the Poet's adventures, at least those which were more than passing fancies, have nearly always developed before the very eyes of the wide world and in a form which, if not official, was at least so obvious as to preclude the possibility of any desire for secrecy on the part of the chief actors.

It would be strange, then, if, in an honest study of Gabriele D'Annunzio, in whose life and work feminine influence is always evident, and often paramount, the subject should be passed over in silence, merely because it demands exceptionally delicate treatment.

The author of these Memoirs proposes to deal with the problem *sed non caste tamen caute* by availing himself, save in speaking of Eleonora Duse, of the subtle veil of anonymity, fortunately provided by the Poet's invariable trick of giving to the women he desired or noticed exotic and high-sounding names. The author leaves to those who, from near or afar, have followed D'Annunzio's fortunes the diversion of replacing the fictitious names by the real ones.

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It is traditional that the great love episodes in the story of mankind end in tragedy, perhaps because their very nature is a defiance to the normality of everyday life. Do we not speak of them as the "fatal passions"? But our hero, as I hasten to reassure my readers, has conformed to this immutable tradition only in part. If there have been tragic endings to his love affairs, the tragedy has been for the woman, not for the Poet. He has come out unscathed as if his heart had been encased in armour. And the world, envying him such favouritism on the part of Fate, and hating all exception to its rules, has never forgiven him.

The one occasion when he was associated with a woman whose fame, in her own sphere, was equal to his own serves only to bespatter him with mud and to hold him up to public scorn. Yet this was not D'Annunzio's first great passion. There had been other loves in earlier days, when the Poet was not yet at the apex of his fame and when his private life was of no interest to the world. There was, for instance, the affair to which we owe the immortal *Trionfo della Morte* and that other one with a Roman countess which involved him in the scandal of an action for adultery brought against him by her husband.

In July, 1883, D'Annunzio was cited as co-respondent in a case brought by the husband of Countess Maria Gravina Anguissola, and condemned to five months' imprisonment, a sentence which was remitted under a general amnesty. Later, when he was elected a Deputy, the sentence rendered him politically ineligible, but the almost immediate dissolution of the Chamber allowed the matter to be set right.

But doubtless the searching test, the most famous and the most discussed of all D'Annunzio's love affairs, is the one in which his name is coupled with that of Eleonora Duse. It could hardly be otherwise. A liaison between the most famous, the most widely read poet of his epoch and the greatest living actress was, in the nature of things, an incident of outstanding importance—an incident destined to be legendary and historic, like the love of Michelangelo for Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara, of Tasso for Eleonora d'Este, or of Byron for the Countess Guiccioli.

Everyone of any culture had read D'Annunzio and everyone,

cultured or not, had seen the Duse. The meeting of such creative and such interpretative genius was therefore of interest to all thinking humanity.

It may be granted, then, that the world was tremendously interested in this affair—so much so that when an end came to the *grande passion*—an end which the majority attributed to D'Annunzio—women in their hundreds of thousands ranged themselves against the Poet, accusing him of infamy and ingratitude, and men were quick to add to the general opprobrium, heaping their contempt on D'Annunzio for his immorality and unscrupulousness.

Even his warmest admirers, the fanatics among his followers, shrugged their shoulders when the name of Eleonora Duse was mentioned, tacitly refusing to defend their idol, since a defence seemed to them *a priori* impossible. Much the same attitude is taken up to-day by the admirers of Oscar Wilde, when his sexual perversity, too patent to be denied, is brought into discussion.

Now, as no one can accuse me of being a panegyrist—and my book is proof to the contrary—I can permit myself the privilege of reducing that so-called blemish on the escutcheon of my hero to its proper proportions. I say "I can permit myself," and not "I shall try," because truth has accents of her own which need no circumlocution.

Let us patiently trace the source of these allegations.

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What kindled the spark between Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Duse?

Was it real love from the very beginning, an irresistible flame, a consuming fire, a reciprocal love at first sight?

The reader cannot imagine how reluctant I am to be obliged, out of respect for truth, to clip the wings of that lovely and poetical version, but I feel it incumbent on me to disillusion him.

The love of the famous Poet and the incomparable tragédienne owed its beginning to a prosaic meeting, not only brought about by third parties, but resembling those matrimonial alliances which are desired rather by the families than by the contracting

parties and to which we apply the odious epithet *mariage de convenance*.

D'Annunzio had a fervent admiration for the Duse as an actress, and the Duse admired D'Annunzio just as much as a poet, but I can assure you that if those accommodating friends had not put themselves out to a considerable extent, nothing of what actually happened would ever have taken place; at least, nothing more than an intellectual comradeship or, at the most, a fleeting caprice such as sometimes crops up between an author and the actress who takes the leading part in one of his productions.

But the friends of D'Annunzio and the Duse had other ideas. They were urged on and encouraged by a friend of the one and a friend of the other joined the friendly conspiracy; it was the second who took it on himself to present the Poet to the great actress, the two being as yet unknown to each other.

To find the first mention of the Duse by D'Annunzio we must go back a very long way; it is in an article of the *Tribuna* of February, 1885, in which, speaking of various distinguished Roman ladies who were watching a masque from a balcony, he wrote: "*The strange head-dress of the Signorina Duse was silhouetted against the Venetian blinds, like a flower against the background of a vast tapestry.*"

The second of D'Annunzio's references to her is also in a newspaper article and concerns a reception given in Rome by Gandolin. "*Signorina Eleonora Duse, with her exquisite courtesy, came on from an exhausting performance of Theodora. She arrived in her carriage, extremely late, while people were already leaving. Finding herself surrounded by them, she inclined her pallid face through the window, and endeavoured to overcome her hoarseness and speak, but in view of her immense fatigue, she did not alight, and departed after having greeted her friends.*"

In the first article—that of 1885—there is a reference to the way the Duse bowed when out driving (the article dealt with the subject of bowing). The reference is brief and unflattering.

"*It is extraordinarily difficult to bow from a carriage. . . . Signora Duse is too artificial. The way in which she bends her head is much too affected.*"

After that, silence for twelve years!

We may infer from the foregoing, from brief extracts given elsewhere and from the long silence which followed these utterances, that neither as a woman nor as an actress had Eleonora Duse impressed the Poet, for he was usually over-lavish in his praises of Roman ladies, overwhelming them, in the literal and in the literary sense, under an avalanche of enthusiastic epithets. This fact is the more curious since D'Annunzio was at the time a professional journalist.

In a general sense it must be admitted that, though he never sought to be the lover of an actress, he always had a liking for the rôle; so that in 1887, writing of actresses in general, rather than of any one actress in particular, he has this passage: "*The more that which a man possesses rouses envy and cupidity in the breasts of others, the more he appreciates it, and the prouder is he of possessing it. It is this which accounts for the fascination of women on the stage. When a whole theatre echoes with applause and is alight with enthusiasm, the man who feels that the smiles and glances of the Diva are his alone, finds the cup too strong for him and grows dumb with pride.*" And he added: "*It is a sweet moment for a mistress when she can say: 'Every letter he writes to me contains the purest flame of his genius, a flame at which I alone may warm myself; the hours which he spends with me are ravished from his glory, and I possess, body and soul, the mysterious being, the flights of whose fancy make women faint with passion.'*"

"*In the democracy of art, the true craftsman, whether of prose or verse, must renounce every advantage save those that come from love; he is not thine who buys thee, but he who loves thee.*"

Now let us return to the famous introduction, which took place, as I have said, through the kind offices of a friend, at the Grand Hotel of Rome, in the year 1897. In spite of D'Annunzio's ardent temperament, it is probable that the conversation at that first meeting turned on their prospects of artistic collaboration rather than on more intimate subjects, the more so as the friends who had brought them together were present.

It may be presumed that, at subsequent interviews, D'Annunzio, who has always displayed a consummate knowledge

of the art of besieging a woman's heart, was quick to manœuvre the conversation on to less exclusively artistic and more dangerous ground. If he did, it will surprise no one familiar with his methods.

It is equally logical and human that Eleonora Duse, described by one who knew her well as "a woman abnormally endowed with amorous instincts," should have sought to transfer their artistic collaboration into a more intimate one.

But if, at the outset, the relationship of the Poet and the actress had all the air of a "marriage of convenience," founded on mutual sympathy which grew with the passing of time, it was not long before their love burst into a blaze. It was now genuine passion which united the two; from then on their lives merged the one into the other; forgetful of everything but themselves and their self-centred happiness, they were isolated by the strength of their feeling from the rest of the world and lived, careless of the judgment of men, "emparadised," as Milton has it, in one another's arms, animated by one desperate hope: that their dream would last for ever.

Their passion touched its highest peak in 1900, during their journey to Vienna for the performance of the *Gioconda*.

"Remember the 10th of April as the culmination of thy love."

Thus one of his notes during his stay in Vienna. And also:

"At the Burgtheater they are giving to-night the Gioconda. I passed in front of the old, grey stone, monumental theatre. In the heavy bronze frames, shut off behind bronze grilles, are the programmes of the performance 'with the name and that of my friend.'

"Strange sensation!

"So living a thing on that old and bygone building, in that traditional city of official art, of academic tradition, of all that is gone for ever."

Great lovers, surely, and worthy of the name, for did not they, too, pursue in vain the vanishing shadow of eternal love?

Why should D'Annunzio and the Duse have been exempt from that inexorable law which condemns all human love to crumble day by day, hour by hour, and which corrupts and slowly extinguishes the highest flames of passion and desire?

Usually these intimate dramas are only known to the man and the woman directly concerned and, unless they come to a tragic end, the public remains in ignorance of them, and curiosity is deprived of the satisfaction of dragging them into the limelight.

But for the Duse and D'Annunzio no such immunity existed.

They had defied the world, and the world was not minded to renounce its rights. It wished to discuss and weigh all the circumstances, to assign responsibility and pronounce its verdict. It was too interested in the actors of the play to renounce its pretensions.

The actress who, thanks to her divine art, had been able to draw tears from her audience by her impersonation of Juliet, Desdemona and Marguerite Gautier, was now shedding real tears. How could anyone remain unmoved in the face of such torture or avoid hating the one who had caused it? The majority of the public saw only, on the one side, the cynical and egoistic Poet; on the other, the woman who had loved and lost, and its verdict went dead against D'Annunzio.

Only thus can be explained the general bitterness against him, the implacable animosity which has endured until this very day and rears its head again and again whenever this painful subject is mentioned even in casual conversation.

In short, their love affair, from the point of view of an impartial observer, ran a very similar course to many of its famous predecessors. There are two accusations, however, levelled against the Poet which place it on a different footing: the first, that he derived financial advantage from his liaison with the great actress; the second, that he pilloried her in unchivalrous fashion in his novel *Il Fuoco*.

With the first accusation I have dealt at length in another chapter. Let us, then, pass to the second, and let us, for the moment, accept as true the quite arbitrary statement that "Stelio" and "La Foscarina" were merely pseudonyms, and that the novel was, in fact, a picture, not only of the past but of the *actual existing relationship* between the two characters of this passionate drama: Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Duse.

Let us now examine what cause for offence could have been given to "Foscarina-Duse" by that much maligned *Fuoco*, a book which I am beginning to believe was not so much read

as *declared* to have been read by D'Annunzio's detractors. I have intentionally underlined the words "actual existing relationship," since this novel was written by D'Annunzio (a circumstance which should not be forgotten) *while his love for the Duse was still in its most frenzied stage*—that is, between 1898 and 1900, the date of its publication.

I invite my readers to peruse it again. It will not be time lost, for *Il Fuoco* is not a novel (at least, not if we accept the dictionary definition: "a fabulous story with ample and interesting developments"), but remains for ever one of the world's greatest literary masterpieces. But do not let us linger to admire the prodigious literary beauties of this work. Let us, instead, ask how the book appears from the strict point of morals, and even when looked at through the spectacles of the most sordid and traditional bourgeois morality.

In what way did that young creative artist, Stelio Effrena (a transparent pseudonym for Gabriele D'Annunzio), love that woman of forty who is called Foscarina, and in whom one and all recognise Eleonora Duse? True, the Poet was thirty-five at the time; but since the Duse was five years older, the disparity between them was real and by no means negligible. Did he allow himself to be loved without returning her love in full? Did he display towards her that indulgent compassion which, for a woman less young than her lover, is the most atrocious outrage he can inflict upon her?

In all the 560 pages of this novel I can find no single sentence which in any way justifies this unpleasant and offensive assumption. The words of Stelio Effrena are, to the verge of monotony, those of the most ardent and sincere lover.

"Each time that kindly fate allows me to be near you, you seem necessary to my very existence . . ."

"You know that nothing is of value to me but what you can give me . . ."

"She had become in a flash a beautiful creature of the night, wrought on a golden anvil out of passion and dreams, a breathing semblance of the immortal fates and of eternal enigmas. The sweetest, the most terrible, the most magnificent soul, inhabited her body, gave her life, shot lightning through her eyes, breathed through her lips . . ."

"Thus Life and Art, the irrevocable Past and the eternal Present, endowed her with depth, with mystery, and with manifold souls; they magnified beyond human limits her ambiguous destinies; they made her the equal of temples and forests."

"'I love you, I love you, you alone, I love all of you,' he said to her in one breath, in a low voice, almost crushing her to him, his arm drawn under hers, unable to tolerate that she should go again through the same suffering, endure again the same atrocious blame . . ."

"He would have liked to take her to him, rock her in his arms, listen to her crying, drink her tears. The very sound of his own caressing words intensified his love for her. Of all her loving self he loved most the faint lines that ran from the corners of her eyes up towards the temples, the dark veins that made her eyelids look like violets, the free play of cheek and chin, and all that in her which seemed touched with autumn sadness, all the shadow of her passionate face . . ."

"Foscarina, Foscarina, my soul, my life, yes, more than life; I know that you can give me more than life; nothing is worth what you can offer; and nothing could console me for your absence from my side of the road of life."

"He wanted to find some unhoped-for way of breaking this iron circle, banishing the sad mood, and leading his friend towards joy once more."

"Oh! dear soul, never, never again will you be desperate and alone! he said, from the depths of a heart filled with brotherly pity to the nomad woman who was recalling the sadness of unceasing wanderings."

"Dear, dear soul, press close against me, yield yourself trustingly to me. I shall not fail you and you will not fail me. We shall, we must, find the secret truth on which our love will rest immutable for ever. . . . Let me help you, since everything good comes to me from you!"

"Of all the forces of nature around them in the diffused light none seemed to him to equal the mystery and beauty of that human face."

"Speak to me! he said. Bring me yet closer to you, dear soul! There has been nothing since I first loved you equal to the path we have trodden together to-day."

"He said: 'How lovely you are!'"

Is any interpretation possible save that the words are those of a passionate lover?

"That is true," D'Annunzio's enemies may concede, "but the words which the author puts into the Foscarina's mouth seem invented with the express purpose of humiliating and damning her in the eyes of the man whom she idolises."

But not even this corresponds to reality; for not to strain the reader's patience with innumerable quotations, it may be said that the insistent *leitmotif* which inspires Foscarina's every thought and word is the thought of her lost youth, and the terror lest this should weaken Stelio's love for her. But is there anything in the novel which hints at such a weakening, the one fact which could be interpreted as a mortal insult to a woman? Stelio Effrena loves the Foscarina to distraction to the last page.

* * * * *

The truth is that the Duse (let us have the courage to call her by her real name) emerges from the fire which purifies her, so sublime, so beautiful, so pure and so great, that no one before could have conceived her in such a guise.

It is incredible that, not only the anger of admitted hypocrites, but the incurable folly of the bourgeois intelligentzia should have found in *Il Fuoco* D'Annunzio's glorification of a pitiless and unscrupulous seducer. As well might one say that Canova, when he immortalised Paulina Borghese for all the centuries to come, was acting indecently or indelicately by revealing her lovely form to posterity.

Already famous as an artist, D'Annunzio immortalised the Duse as a woman. He raised her above the clouds into a sphere of pain, perhaps, but very certainly of sheer beauty.

The masterpiece was written for posterity, not for this generation, which can put names to the models from whom the creator drew his inspiration; moreover, is there not an Indian proverb which says: "The hand of an artist occupied with his art is always pure."

One can understand that the Poet dedicated the *Francesca da Rimini* to "Eleonora Duse of the lovely hands," as he dedicated *Il Fuoco* to "Time and Hope."

Il Fuoco is nothing but the expression of the terrible struggle, the vain effort of a lover's great soul to conquer time by the force of hope. Even the figure of her odious rival, of that Donatella Arval who is but a phantom born of the jealous pangs of the Foscarina, is absorbed and annihilated by the burning love of the Duse, tragedy incarnate.

If all the panegyrists and pseudo-biographers of D'Annunzio and the Duse—instead of repeating *ad nauseam* one of the many phrases attributed to her: "Madness is no richer than you" (a beautiful sentence not devoid of artistic effect, but the meaning of which, in spite of considerable effort, I have been unable to seize)—had called the attention of their readers to another phrase (how much more sincere!) used by the great actress and lover to one who asked her whether the Poet had really exploited her—"No, he has done worse to me"—they would have rendered an inestimable service to her memory, since the latter phrase has an exquisitely human sound.

But many consider that D'Annunzio and the Duse had no right to be merely man and woman with passions, feelings and weaknesses, adoring or hating each other, quarrelling, parting and coming together again—in fact, living their own lives.

They should, in the interest of their public, have been "superman" and "superwoman," unreal and unlikeable beings, whose intercourse with each other was limited to honeyed and exotic phrases, turned with literary skill. Such conversation, however admirable in a work of art like *Il Fuoco*, could only have been tiresome, and slightly ridiculous, if employed in daily life.

I am ready to admit that the love between D'Annunzio and the Duse (not the love pictured in *Il Fuoco*, but the *real* one) was a very lofty thing, as might have been expected from two individuals so high above the ordinary level. And it is very certain that their love-making was not conducted in the familiar phrases of the typist and the boy from college.

It is hardly to be supposed that the Duse called D'Annunzio "her handsome blond," or that he called her "his pretty brunette." But surely there is a difference between such language as this and sentences culled from the *Song of Songs*.

Personally, I had few opportunities of seeing them together,

and those few, I confess, lowered the opinion which I had formed of the "personal intelligence" of the actress (I say "personal intelligence," meaning her intelligence off the stage). The general impression she gave me was that of an accomplished *poseuse*.

Every gesture, every word, every expression of her face, every attitude of her body, even the sound of her voice, so harmonious, although slightly nasal—everything about her was artificial, so much so that I never could understand how Gabriele D'Annunzio, a man of extreme simplicity, especially in private life, could put up for years with so patent and tiresome a lack of naturalness in one who was his daily and hourly companion.

Eleonora Duse, so divinely, so unbearably human on the stage, became in D'Annunzio's presence a tiresome and second-rate actress; she played the lofty and emotional rôle of a divinity, troubled at finding herself among mere mortals.

I say "in D'Annunzio's presence" because I never saw or spoke to her elsewhere. Though I have been assured on all sides that with everyone else she was the simplest and most modest woman in the world, I take the liberty to doubt it.

I can never forget a morning at the Hôtel Cavour in Milan, just before the first performance of *Francesca da Rimini*, when we made bold (myself and an old childhood friend of the Poet, the writer Ettore Moschino) to advise D'Annunzio to cut out two or three swallows in the first act of the tragedy. There was a poetical repetition in these which presented no difficulty to a *reader* in the text but which appeared to us very dangerous from the point of view of the *spectator*. Spectators are a fickle, irritable and hysterical crowd, easily antagonized by the merest hint of ridicule, capable of reversing their judgment on the slightest provocation and so causing the downfall of a play which, with the one particular word or sentence omitted, would have been an undoubted success.

The Poet realised perfectly the truth and the logic of our remarks, which were directed solely to the theatrical aspect of the matter; realised them, indeed, so well that he was about to strike out this dangerous repetition.

Not so Eleonora Duse, who should have been the first to point out this stumbling-block, since she was acting in the play

and ought to have noticed sooner than we did. Moulded in a mediæval gown which she wore in the house—perhaps as a tribute to the play—she turned towards the Poet with the air and gestures of a Niobe watching the massacre of her children and repeated time after time, in desperately theatrical and lamenting tones: “Gabriele, leave me my swallows! . . . my poor swallows . . . I must have my swallows!”

This scene—for it was a veritable scene—at last became so intolerable that Moschino began turning over the leaves of a book, whilst I looked out of a window. D’Annunzio merely smiled, and in the voice of a mother giving back a bonbon to a fretting child, said: “*All right, all right, you shall have your swallows, but let us speak no more of it.*”

The swallows remained—and fortunately caused no harm. But there remained also in our memories the indelible impression of a woman totally devoid of humour.

I have mentioned earlier that *Il Fuoco* was composed and written during the most intense and passionate period of the liaison between the Poet and the actress, and it should not be forgotten, if we are to judge this case fairly and equably, that D’Annunzio was not a man to be content with spending a couple of hours two or three afternoons a week with the woman he loved.

He lived with her connubially. And even the word connubially hardly fits the case, for the normal husband, however enamoured he may be of his wife, at least leaves the house occasionally; he goes to his club, pays calls, dines out. He has, in short, outside his marriage a personal life of his own, however innocent it may be. And the same is true of his wife.

But this was not true of D’Annunzio with Eleonora Duse. The Poet lived with the woman he loved like a gaoler with a prisoner, like a nurse with a patient.

Now, in view of all this—and every word of it will be borne out by everyone with inside knowledge of D’Annunzio’s life with the Duse—it would be flying in the face of logic to suppose that the Duse was not in almost hourly touch with the progress of her lover’s work.

I myself saw her on two occasions correcting fragments of *Il Fuoco*, and have reason to believe that these occasions were by no means exceptional.

Now, was this action of the Duse merely one more proof, added to all those she had given already, of her adoration of the Poet and of her dedication to his service?

Was it a sublimated form of morbid masochism?

Or was she led to it simply by the conviction that D'Annunzio's work in no way belittled her, but, on the contrary, immortalised her anguished love and raised her to unsuspected heights?

I cannot answer the question; I can only state the facts and put forward the hypothesis which seems to me most probable.

I can affirm, however, that to the end she remained on affectionate terms with the Poet, in spite of the fact that she invariably employed towards him a sort of unnatural rhetoric, which she seemed unable to resist.

Twice, while he was at Arcachon, she wired to him: "Change your wings."

In the *Contemplazione della Morte* the Poet recalls the incident and writes: "*And that day another, once sought by me but long since separated from me by space and by necessity, sends me a message of four words: 'Change your wings again.'*"

All the public utterances of the Duse, bearing directly or indirectly on the Poet, have this sibylline character. Like the answers of the Delphic Oracle, they are open to any interpretation.

I quote another instance. Across a photograph of herself which she sent to D'Annunzio's mother, she wrote: "We must pray to the mountains because they are pure." The idea is doubtless poetic, but the thought obscure.

Nearly ten years later, and not long before she died, Eleonora Duse visited D'Annunzio and the Vittoriale after his "mysterious" fall from one of the villa windows.

The great actress had grown almost maternal towards her eternal child. He has called her from that day "Consolazione," and it was on that day, perhaps, that he understood, for the first time, how greatly she had loved him.

It was to her that he dedicated his *Il Venturiero senza Ventura* with the words: "*To E. D., last-born daughter of St. Mark—harmonious vision of creative suffering—and sovereign goodness*"; and it was to her that he dedicated also *Compagno dagli occhi senza ciglia*: "*To E. D., who, because of her genius and her love—*

in all times of exile—was by turns the light of a lamp and the light of a funeral pyre.” Later he spoke of her as a “*Vanished Divinity.*”

* * * * *

One icy morning in February, 1931, the Reverend Mother Maria di Gesù, Superior of the Carmelite Convent of the “Reposoir,” set out, at the request of the Bishop of Chambéry, to inspect the side of an old castle, set in the mountains at a height of over 6000 feet, where it had been proposed to install a new convent. She wished to go alone. Overtaken by the storm, and overpowered by cold, she fainted and died by the road, a willing victim of her sense of duty and a martyr to her Faith. This paragon among women, who for twenty years had lived withdrawn from the world, bore at one time one of the greatest names of the Italian aristocracy.

Tall, proud, fair-haired, and with a tender gravity in her wide blue eyes, an accomplished horsewoman, and a great lady without a peer for grace, for originality of intelligence, for refinement or for culture, she crossed the path of Gabriele D’Annunzio, and in no great time she was his mistress.

For close on four years, forgetful of her children, shut up in the famous villa of the Capponcina, she watched over the existence of the Poet during one of the most tormented and anguished periods of his life: she shared with him grey and desolate hours, and was for him at once the most ardent mistress, the most faithful comrade, and the most irreproachable friend; and for four years Gabriele D’Annunzio rewarded her with an equal passion and an equal companionship.

They met for the first time at her brother’s wedding. The brother was a man well known in social circles, a politician of some repute, and D’Annunzio was one of his witnesses.

The lady (she admitted this later) had long hesitated to be present, deeply attached though she was to her brother. And for what reason? Simply because she *knew* that she would have to meet Gabriele D’Annunzio, whom she detested both as a writer and as a man, with an intensity only possible to a woman of great intelligence and personality, when she hates with all her brain, all her heart and all the strength of her feelings.

For her, at the time, Gabriele D'Annunzio was all that was most antipathetic. Severely ascetic herself, she regarded him as a decadent artist and a false and evil man. All she knew of him was that he had the reputation of being an unscrupulous Don Juan, and an unrivalled seducer, that he denied the possibility of virtue in woman, besmirched purity and belittled every exalted sentiment.

Was it the evident exaggeration of this conception which made her love him? Or was it the ability displayed later by the Poet in showing her how greatly the rumours spread by Dame Legend had led her to misunderstand him? I cannot say.

All that I *can* affirm is that, a few weeks after their first meeting, the new mistress joined D'Annunzio in his retreat of the Capponcina, and regardless of the world's opinion, incapable by temperament of submitting to moral restrictions and social inhibitions, she entered on a life in common with him, a life which was to last without a break close on four years.

It might have been foreseen that, with a woman of her superiority by the side of a man like Gabriele D'Annunzio, life would assume a form very far removed from any bourgeois conception; and very certainly it did. The Capponcina became the scene of a whole series of follies, each madder than the last.

"*Quem vult perdere Jupiter prius dementat,*" says the well-known Latin proverb, and though, in spite of some affinity in these relations with the other sex, it would, perhaps, be exaggeration to compare D'Annunzio with Jove, it is yet certain that D'Annunzio's influence worked on this woman too, as it worked on every woman to whom fancy or sex attracted him, and completely threw her off her balance, though she had gifts of her own which might, one would have thought, have exercised, on the contrary, a stabilising influence on him.

Faithful to habit, he imposed on her a new name, and she who was one day to die in the snow under the name of Maria di Gesù was proudly christened by the Poet, Niké (Victory). She owed this glorious name not, I think, to her conquest of the Poet's heart, but rather to her own physical beauty. The superb lines of Niké's form recalled the Victory of Samothrace—a masterpiece very dear to D'Annunzio.

A wit might have found further justification for the name in

the fact that the Poet had clipped her wings and caused her to lose her head.

D'Annunzio and Niké embarked at the Capponcina, then at the summit of its splendour and pomp, on the life of Indian nabobs: fifteen servants, luxurious stables, a pack of hounds, flowers, perfumes, choice and abundant food—in a word, all the refinement and the luxury which life of the period offered to those willing to spend without counting the cost.

The Poet went frequently into Florence, and every time returned with some new purchase. Antique furniture, damasks, priceless articles of every kind were daily added to the store already accumulated during Eleonora Duse's tenure of the Capponcina. D'Annunzio literally ransacked the warehouses of those dear friends of his, the dealers in antiques—those human jackals who, some years later, when the Capponcina was put up to auction, were waiting on the doorstep to buy back, for five lire, what they had sold to their creditor and spend-thrift client for five hundred.

On this occasion the D'Annunzian legend fell short of the truth.

Money was spent on so incredible a scale both by D'Annunzio and by his adorable companion that it looked as if they were trying to compensate themselves by one wild fling for the austerity and reasonableness of some previous existence.

I once saw with my own eyes D'Annunzio and Niké's favourite horses bedded down on Persian carpets belonging to her. One of these animals, a horse named Malatestino, on one ride put this mistress's life in danger.

Gabriele D'Annunzio, in a letter written to me, described the accident as follows: "*That ugly brute which you rode had the honour of carrying N. Frightened, I fancy, by the flapping of her habit, he bolted and careered wildly along the Settignano road, galloping at breakneck speed and followed, of course, by me on Malatesta. I need not tell you how terrified I was for her. We were saved by a miracle. The brute stopped in front of a wall. N. is getting over it, and has been marvellously brave. What a hallucinating moment in our lives!*"

What D'Annunzio loved in Niké, apart from her physical and intellectual qualities, was her fiery horsemanship and especially her love of hunting and her manly courage. Some years before

he had devoted many pages to another horsewoman, that famous lady, Eugénie Montijo, Empress of the French.

"She was a true Diana of the Imperial forests, and she recalled the goddess by the fire and the ferocity with which she hunted the stags of Compiègne. With her knife glittering in her perfect hand, she would pierce the animal's neck with the same calm assurance with which other women draw a needle through immaculate linen. She had no repugnance for blood. She was a powerful horsewoman and tackled obstacles as courageously as she encountered wild animals. In one hunt at Compiègne, when the stag plunged into the lake and was surrounded by hounds trying to drag him to shore, the Empress leapt light-heartedly from the saddle, unsheathed her knife and struck her prey to the heart.

"Niké was a second Eugénie."

* * * *

With life lived in such spectacular fashion, a fashion worthy of the Renaissance, it could hardly even be said that money was being squandered; it simply went up in smoke; and the one who bore the whole brunt of this state of affairs was that most unfortunate person, the Poet's publisher, who almost every day received imploring letters and despairing telegrams asking for money, money, money, with an insistence exasperatingly monotonous.

I was that publisher . . . ! And I leave the reader to picture for himself the sharp emotion with which I recall the period. Niké, who, by her talent and her culture, might have been a source of inspiration to D'Annunzio, became instead—but by no fault of hers—the primary cause of the longest period of unproductiveness in all D'Annunzio's career.

For close on two and a half years she was continuously ill, frequently in peril of her life.

Gabriele D'Annunzio had to transform himself from an artist and a lover into something very like a nurse.

He wired to me during those sad days (and he was certainly sincere): *"Operation only partly successful sufferings horrible torture never ending."*

And some time later: *"For the last three weeks we have lived in the excruciating sadness of a nursing home Via Bolognese 48*

New operation took place Monday but danger not yet averted my anguish indescribable." And a few days later: *"My affliction disturbs me inexpressibly."* And a month later: *"Shall write to you as soon as the atrocious heart-beats have subsided."*

There came a day when Niké finally recovered. But, alas! Gabriele D'Annunzio had also recovered. His passion for her was gone. Illness, promiscuity, the sad and lonely hours, pre-occupations of every kind had destroyed it. All that remained was "good fellowship," that friendship which for one still in love is the most insufferable and the most wounding of all sentiments.

So Niké vanished from the Poet's life, as the Duse had previously vanished, and as all those who had preceded her had vanished.

Contrary to his custom, D'Annunzio never perpetuated her memory in his work, perhaps because the passion of the man was too strong to bear analysis by the writer. She was the only woman, with the exception of his wife, in connection with whom D'Annunzio ever thought of marriage.

It was with this idea in his mind that he travelled with me to Switzerland, and in consultation with the famous Fribourg lawyer, Maître Giron, took the first steps towards obtaining a divorce. Later, partly for reasons which I have given elsewhere and partly because he always shrank from the responsibility of decisions, he abandoned the plan altogether.

However, we managed to enjoy the trip thoroughly, and that in a fashion quite out of keeping with its purpose; so much so that a year later, in a letter reminding me that it was the anniversary of our journey, D'Annunzio wrote: *"I embrace you and long for our jolly Swiss laughter."*

* * * * *

Already a new star was rising above D'Annunzio's horizon: this time it was a Tuscan gentlewoman, the bearer of a name dear to French chroniclers in the early years of Louis XIV.

To describe the particular type of love which bound the Poet to this new mistress would be difficult for any writer, and for the modest author of these pages a still further embarrassment lies in the fact that, with very slight modification, D'Annunzio himself

has described his passion, with all its savage sensuality, in his novel *Forse che sì, forse che no*. The latter pages of that work, which show passion at dramatic grips with the law, is merely an exact and painful picture of actual events in the lives of the unfortunate lovers.

A repetition of the story of their love would be devoid of interest; it could be no more than a paraphrase of what the pen of a famous poet has already superbly written.

The "Isabella Inghirami" of the novel was in real life, and before she met the Poet, a blond and tranquil creature, more beautiful of body than of face, a woman intellectually normal, almost insignificant, whom his passion literally transformed, setting her at one stroke aflame with such unsuspected but inextinguishable fire, with such ardent and insatiable lust, that it seemed the work rather of the devil than of a man.

When D'Annunzio entrusted the translation into French of his novel he first thought of calling it *Le Vertige*. He gave up this intention, as Coty had just launched a new perfume bearing the same name. Had he kept to this title, it would have corresponded much more to the subject of the novel than its Italian successor, which, as we all know, refers to a motto used by the princely family of Gonzaga.

It was, in fact, a real whirlpool in which the two lovers were caught; for months on end they remained in the most absolute isolation, in a small villa on the Tyrrhenian Sea, called by D'Annunzio "La Villa delle Tempeste," the rooms of which—even the dining-room—had little furniture outside the most indispensable objects, but were filled with countless great divans covered in red damask and heaped with blood-red cushions of all shapes and sizes.

I must leave it to the reader's imagination to fill in the hours and days spent by the lovers in this satanic abode. Hundreds of letters, saturated with passionate sensuality, bear witness, even more than the novel, to D'Annunzio's passion for his mistress. They were written during their brief periods of separation, and a curious combination of circumstances resulted, a few years later, in their falling again into their author's hands.

He had the patience to recopy them, turning them into a manuscript, which he entitled *Solus ad Solam*. The letters were

of such audacity that it was only possible to follow famous precedents and print a limited edition for private circulation only.

The old publisher, Emilio Treves, was given a glimpse of this when he first went to see the Poet at Arcachon in 1913.

Treves was in absolute ignorance of the existence of this collection of letters. The three of us were sitting in the library of the Chalet Saint-Dominique when D'Annunzio gave him the manuscript and asked him, with a smile of anticipation, to glance through its pages. Old Treves began reading it while I stood behind him, leaning against the back of his armchair and looking over his shoulder.

After greedily absorbing some of the contents, he turned towards me with that expression of his which I so well knew, and said: "It makes me feel younger, doesn't it you?"

And, indeed, the effects of the text were of a nature to put it into serious competition with Professor Voronoff. Will it be published one day? I cannot say. Human and legal inconsistency is such that it may forbid or allow anything; it excludes young people from certain films, lest they catch a fleeting glimpse of a lovely breast, and it allows any boy of fifteen free access to the works of Martial, whose suggestive and unscrupulous poems display at length all the turpitudes and perversions of the Roman decadence.

* * * * *

The Tuscan noblewoman, once escaped from the fiery orbit of D'Annunzio, took up her old life again, and her place was taken by another woman who indirectly exercised an even more remarkable influence on the Poet.

* * * * *

It has been D'Annunzio's fate to be exposed to his contemporaries as a man who cast the substance of women to the four winds; to be described, in blunter language, as an elegant exploiter of women. But the one thing that cannot be denied is that the four affairs I have described cost D'Annunzio the Capponcina, which was auctioned, to their shame, by a small group of money-lenders, who divided the spoil. Nor can any one of the four mistresses, who were the means, however

involuntarily, of reducing D'Annunzio to such straits, complain of being exploited by him, or allege that her fortune was in any way impaired by any fault of his. I challenge anyone to bring proof to the contrary.

This, too, is true: as soon as D'Annunzio arrived in France he was obliged, in order to live at all, to negotiate a loan of 60,000 francs, which he obtained, through my mediation, from M. Rigaud, at that time Secretary of the Société des Auteurs, the security being the future proceeds of his theatrical productions.

While D'Annunzio was reading in the Italian papers daily descriptions of the dispersion of his most valued treasures, this is what happened to his former mistresses. The first—Eleonora Duse—continued her tours with varying success, but never for a moment relinquishing her tenure of the "Porziuncola"; the second—Niké—remained what she had always been—a multi-millionairess; and the third—she who passes under the name of Isabella Inghirami—returned to find her home exactly as she had left it, and her fortune unimpaired. The fourth, who had preceded the Poet to France, while D'Annunzio had to content himself with a room in a hotel, maintained a sumptuous flat expensively furnished under her own direction.

Such, then, are the women's fortunes which D'Annunzio is alleged to have squandered, or to have been the means of squandering. I am still waiting for someone to furnish evidence of the charge other than mere calumny; but I fancy the "wait" will be a long one.

"One who knows him" wrote, with regard to this—with perfect justification: "The women whom D'Annunzio was said to exploit have in reality always exploited him."

In being loved by him they have received the most precious compensation for their surrender, which was a fruit of their own pleasure even more than for his.

Among these women, Eleonora Duse should be set apart. She was really beneficent to him, but not in the vulgar sense which calumniators attach to this word. That in conferring the prestige of her immortal art on D'Annunzio's work, she augmented his earnings, is true. She also inspired, consoled and understood him, and incited him to work. In this resides her

distinction from other women, creatures of beauty but of vanity, who gave him no peace, tired him out, distracted him from his work by plunging him in the social round of festivities, receptions and boudoirs. It has been asserted that they gave him trifling presents. It may be so. But it is also certain that the Poet, so chivalrous and generous, must have returned them on a lavish scale, offering them a hundred to their one, and if he was really kept by women it is extraordinary that he found himself on the brink of ruin.

Has Gabriele D'Annunzio had other great amours? Has he truly and intensely loved other women for shorter or longer periods of his life? It is certain that if we desired to include in this chapter the innumerable adventures which bore perhaps the outward semblance of passion, but were in reality only flickering flames destined to peter out at the first puff of wind, there would be no end to them. In Paris, for example, in the early months of 1911, he seemed really enamoured of a woman at least thirty years younger than himself. For two months, although circumstances prevented any close intercourse, he lived only on his thoughts of and for her. There were ardent letters and even more ardent rendezvous. Everything should have contributed to make the new love a lasting one. With the abandon of early youth, she was ready for all those madnesses, which women will contemplate only for a first lover; and then, for once, the Poet could with justice lay claim to the privilege which he had so often, and so erroneously, supposed to be his own.

In spite of the secrecy with which the two lovers shrouded their intercourse, in spite of the help of an intelligent and devoted woman friend, something of the affair leaked out. It is very hard for a young woman deeply and unashamedly in love to hide her emotions successfully.

Her husband, one of those jealous and stupidly tyrannical men, who claim absolute freedom for themselves and yet refuse to tolerate the smallest irregularity on the part of their unhappy wives, had, until D'Annunzio appeared on the Parisian horizon, felt so absolutely secure about his wife's fidelity that he was in the habit of boasting about it in public, just as he had the bad taste to boast of his own conquests, so that, when the rumour of a liaison between the lovely young woman and the

great Poet began to spread in that corrupt and flippant sphere, the *Tout-Paris*, the news was greeted with general and unrestrained laughter.

A well-known and popular Parisian, entering one of the most exclusive clubs in the capital, called out delightedly, "*Il est cocu!*" and the news, the meaning of which everyone instantly grasped, was applauded as boisterously as if it had been a great victory. There was a whole chorus of "Bravo, D'Annunzio!"

But even this love of D'Annunzio's was fated to enjoy only a brief spell of sunshine.

D'Annunzio's fires burned out as quickly as they flamed up. The last letters of the young and desperate mistress ("*La Piccola*—"The little one"—he always called her), which followed him to the Landes, were never even opened. She wrote in vain:

"Last night, the idea that you had gone, that you were fading further and further from me, caused me terrible anguish. My whole being so wanted to follow you that I could not stay in my room. I wrapped myself in a cloak and softly, softly, went out into the garden . . ."

But the Poet knew only too well for what reason he wrote to her no longer. His thoughts and his desire had turned elsewhere.

This time, however, he had broken a heart. Perhaps he does not know it to this day. But those who came after him, and on whom "*La Piccola*" revenged herself for all she had suffered at D'Annunzio's hands, knew it only too well.

* * * * *

On a day in March, 1920, Gabriele D'Annunzio, who during the whole of his life had tried simply to fall in love in the loftiest and yet the most ordinary sense of the word, determined to allow himself, and actually succeeded in allowing himself, this, the greatest luxury of all.

And the man who had rung all the changes on love and desire, sensuality and passion, yet without so much as skirting the domain of pure sentiment, knelt, morally and physically, at the feet of a creature utterly different from all the others,

divinely simple and divinely sweet, who asked nothing of him and of whom (unique instance of a lifetime!) he dared ask nothing save a love that was almost ideal, the gifts of a young kiss on the forehead, the devotion of a limpid glance.

This rare idyll was born in Fiume; of a fever and in a fever, it blazed up—and yet never spent itself, Fate deciding that it should never be consummated by that act of possession to which men continue to aspire, though they know it spells doom to human love. And the lovely woman he desired was transformed for the Poet into a fragrant memory, as Daphne who was changed into a laurel in the arms of Apollo.

To this immaterial love D'Annunzio consecrated four letters, permission to publish has been given me by the one fortunate enough to inspire them.

"Dear M . . .

"I send you an evening salute.

"I have just heard that you are not well. My own head, too, is aching badly after a long day which brought my soul nothing but suffering.

"There are those around me who stir up the usual trouble, and even those most devoted to me have no care to spare me.

"It would have been sweet to meet you to-night and to see the fraternal pity in your eyes. I remember the words spoken that one evening which is already so long ago.

"I remain, with a melancholy which perhaps resembles you,

"Your G.D.A."

"M . . .

"I am just back from a run with 'le Fiamme Nere.' I saw the guns trained out to sea. I shouted and sang and have a great thirst.

"I shall see you soon. I know not if I shall be able to tell you the tender things which I hold in my heart for you, so I write these words to you!

"The spirit of our nocturnal walk has slept with me like a branch in leaf, which, in my dreams, I could touch and smell.

"All day long, weighed down by terrible cares, I have seen the shadow of your face, the swaying of your hyacinth curls, the laughter in your eyes, puckered to give it passage . . .

"All day long, I have felt a touch of coolness in the burning of my wonderful wound.

"I wish to give thanks to you for the involuntary gift.

"G.

"April 1920."

"Friend,

"To-night there is nothing in the world to console me, save your compassion. At last I am here alone. To-morrow I shall be the prey of all, the smiling prey of all.

"It was beautiful, that fervour of men along all the garlanded heights.

"And beautiful, those 'marching forests.' The measured tread of the green boughs was almost religious; the pine branches coming down the steps of the 'Calvario' might have been a rite of spring. Every soldier had his branch, some a whole tree. I looked for you in the streets of the city. I searched as I passed for those eyes of yours that love me. Nothing else of you loves me but your eyes.

"But on this side and on that in the street were lifeless phantoms. The city had but one pulse, the beating of your heart, to which I listened yesterday with a voluptuousness veiled by grief.

"It is not long, friend, since I stood with a profound and secret desolation in the midst of the delirious crowd.

"Till but a little while ago the sound of shouting came in at my windows, and I have an inexpressible need to bend down in front of you, whom for a whole day (and how long it is!) I have not seen.

"Where are you? Were you at the theatre? Did you hear my voice? I look for you always and do not find you.

"And where is your compassion, oh, M.?"

"G.

"13.3.1920 (midnight)."

"M . . .

"I woke with something in my blood, new and confused. I smelt hyacinths and their scent was overpowering. My temples ached. Because of the flowers too near my pillow? Or because of the intoxication which the night wind had not blown away? I do not know.

"M . . . , your face this morning is in the centre of my soul, but it was there long since, there from the first moment.

"Nothing in the world is sweeter than you.

"Last night, while I was on my knees, your low voice ran over me like a stream at night, I thought of nights when I bathed alone in a little river of the Landes, running between high banks, over sand that was almost phosphorescent.

"I long desperately to see you again: to take you in my arms, to give you my silence, to be given yours, that dwells not in your throat or mouth but beneath your lashes—eyes of silence and of melancholy.

"What shall I do? Now I am going out. I shall go up into the hills with strong and lusty men. I shall tear a branch from some great tree. I shall pluck dark violets from the pallid grass. I shall speak heroic words. I shall see the rough affection in the eyes of soldiers who find me as young as themselves.

"And I want to be alone with you in some sunlit meadow, your hand in mine.

"March, 1920."

* * * * *

And that was all.

CHAPTER XVI

IN PARIS—1914-1915

"Long Live Uncle Nicholas!"—"Homo sine pecunia, imago mortis"
—D'Annunzio discovers the "Métro"—The Poet and the banana
cart—The absent Ambassador—The tragic predictions of a War
Correspondent—D'Annunzio prepares for the siege of Paris—An
attractive proposition—Two historical proclamations—D'Annunzio
and Gallieni—"Le canon, Monsieur!"—The Château of the Duke
de Montesquiou—Etiquette—A true story of the helfry at Soissons—
False alarms—D'Annunzio is arrested—A tailor with foresight—Italy
unarmed and irresolute.

THE war surprised D'Annunzio when he was about to leave Paris to return to his retreat, the Villa Saint-Dominique at Arcachon. It was his intention to do some hard work.

It may be well to impress upon the reader that all current expressions assume a special meaning when applied to Gabriele D'Annunzio. When we say that "So-and-so is about to do something," it is reasonably certain that the plans are made definitely and that the date is fixed. That is not at all the case with D'Annunzio. He can be *about* to do something for months, and even years. Therefore I can affirm that from 1910 to 1915 he was constantly about to return to Italy without once being serious in his intention.

The Poet, then, was torn between the boredom of prolonging his stay in Paris, which no longer amused him, and the lack of energy which always comes over him when he must contemplate a voyage. The Germans, not at all like him where the execution of a project is concerned, suddenly invaded Belgium.

D'Annunzio was living in the furnished apartment on the Avenue Kléber, where he had finished *Cabiria*. The brutal announcement of war aroused in him a bellicose enthusiasm which strongly resembled a state of supreme intoxication. He had written only a few weeks before, when there had still been hope that the war might be averted: "*The hope of peace flows in the gutters, on the thresholds of shops, in the sewers, like so much neglected refuse which the sweepers of to-morrow will collect with*

other refuse and cart away in their squeaky wagons. Is this the last day of humiliation? Are these the final hours of shame?"

The heroic, the unforeseen, the violent have always held for D'Annunzio a charm, a strong seduction. When the war broke out between the Balkan States and Turkey, and I wired him from Paris that Montenegro had commenced hostilities by opening fire on Scutari, in Albania, he wired back: "Long live Uncle Nicholas!"

We must consequently not be astonished if the Franco-German clash, which culminated in a European conflagration, plunged D'Annunzio into a veritable orgy of excitement after so many years of peace, with the exception of the wars of the Balkans and Tripoli, which had been fought too far away from him to make any direct impression on his mind.

His antipathy for everything German only served to increase his enthusiasm. The race of Arminius was now engaging in conflict with a race united to that of D'Annunzio by a thousand ethnical, cultural and historical ties. His soul—more than Latin, Mediterranean perhaps (for has he not written: "*I glory in the fact that I am a Latin, and I look upon everyone of different blood as a barbarian*"?)—sensed at once that the supremacy of two civilisations was at stake and, from the very outset, he recognised the historic necessity of Italy's entry into the war.

But since this intervention did not take place during the first months of the conflict, it was natural enough for him to espouse the cause of France, to follow with intense interest the luck of the French armies and to burn with the same ardour and the same desperate hope as the French themselves. "*From that evening*," he wrote later, on the subject of his interview with Marcel Boulenger, in the *Leda senza Cigno*, "*our two countries were only one for us.*"

This sentiment for his Latin brothers was not new with him. Long before, at the time of the assassination of Sadi Carnot in 1894, he had written to one of his French friends a letter which the *Temps* had published, and in which he had said: "*What is most consoling in this terrible misfortune is that, assuredly, the heart of Italy has never palpitated so strongly for her big sister, has never felt so strongly the communion of the Latin blood.*"

Twenty years later, on Italy's entrance into the war, writing to

Barrès, he said: *"To-day I embrace you with even more effusion, and I would extend this proof of the deepest sympathy to your entire country. The green and the blue of our flags make a single colour at the fall of night: the same breeze passes through our Arc de Triomphe and yours. We had two countries but this evening we have only one, which extends from French Flanders to the Sicilian sea——"*

And, finally, at the time of the Armistice, he sent this telegram to Marcel Boulenger: *"Words are vain; embracing you, I embrace my dear French brothers."*

To return to August, 1914, what did D'Annunzio write about the Germans? *"The invader's horses are descending the length of the valley of the Oise towards Paris; they are already stamping on the heart of France; they are trampling the most sensitive part of the afflicted land; each of their hoofprints profanes a memory, offends a beauty, renews a grief."*

If the first days of the war—thanks to the epic resistance of the Belgian troops and to the brilliant French action in Alsace—were for the Parisians feverish, anxious days, replete with hopes and bitter disillusiones, they, nevertheless, did not create the impression of something frightful, something terribly near as was, in reality, the case.

Although D'Annunzio was on friendly terms with Captain Gheusi, General Gallieni's A.D.C., and although he sometimes sent me to the Avenue des Invalides for the news, the facts which I managed to obtain from the amiable captain were sparse, and became more and more vague as the days went by.

The Poet was the prey of personal preoccupations. One was the eternal question of money, rendered far more serious by the circumstances. The proclamation of a moratorium on the part of the banks, the impossibility of receiving money from Italy, the departure or rather the flight from Paris of almost all our friends and acquaintances, of whom the greater part were habitués of "palaces" who would not tolerate inconvenience and, above all, were revolted by anything so serious and annoying as a war, all these things served greatly to complicate D'Annunzio's existence. The knowledge that practically everyone in Paris was in an identical situation was but a relative consolation. His face

became the living expression of the old adage: "*Homo sine pecunia, imago mortis.*"

There being no other sure means of locomotion, D'Annunzio was forced to make the discovery of the "Métro," an institution which he completely ignored despite the years spent in Paris. The Poet, being absolutely convinced that everything which costs but little must essentially be full of faults, had always imagined the "Métro" to be an invention, useful, perhaps, but ignoble and repugnant. He consequently avoided it assiduously, the while recommending it to all his employees. One fine day, with me as a guide, he cautiously descended the steps of a "Métro" station. His impression was beyond all expectations. The "Métro" appeared to him marvellous, amusing, elegant, almost magic. He thenceforth considered it his duty to sing its praises and to suggest its usage to all his acquaintances who had been frequenting it for years, with, of course, a far more moderate enthusiasm. But when the "Métro" practically ceased its functions, as, for instance, during the battle of the Ourcq, he was like a legless man abandoned in the middle of the street.

And when Gabriele D'Annunzio is deprived of those comforts to which he is accustomed, he is about as lively as a corpse. Furthermore, he has never been fond of walking, unless, under exceptional circumstances, in the open country. I believe that he would have shut himself up indefinitely in the house had he not been saved by a banana cart—or, rather, by me, who, having by chance discovered this method of transportation, rented it for our common use.

This providential "carriage" was passing nonchalantly along the Champs-Élysées. It was drawn by two horses which had escaped requisition on account of their age, and it bore the name of a banana importer whose commerce had been interrupted by the war. I conversed with the driver, and, after a certain amount of bickering we made a bargain: for ten francs a day the cart and the horses were completely at the disposal of Gabriele D'Annunzio. He was not particularly proud when he saw that he would be forced to sit on a high seat with his legs dangling in the air, but the comical aspect of the outfit quickly overcame his first misgivings. Our first excursion was to the branch office of the Banco di Roma, where D'Annunzio intended to

ask the manager for a small loan. This gentleman—Monsieur Lusena—received the Poet most cordially, and, with no other security than his word, gave him the desired amount—little enough to-day but, at the time, a very considerable sum: five thousand francs.

By way of thanks, D'Annunzio insisted on driving him back to his home on the banana wagon which crossed Paris bearing the most celebrated poet of the day, a bank manager, my humble self and a stenographer, who, in climbing aboard, had displayed a pair of legs so charming as to excuse her abundantly for having joined us without an invitation.

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Despite the astute fashion in which they were worded, the communiqués from General Headquarters could not conceal the seriousness of the situation through which France was passing. D'Annunzio did not peruse these documents with the simple curiosity of a neutral, but, on the contrary, he showed his concern for the misfortunes of the French by concentrating all his energies to the establishment of the Italian hospital, the idea of which, as well as its actual foundation, was due to the initiative of the Duchess of Camastra before the official declaration of Italy's neutrality. This was the first tangible proof of the solidarity which united the majority of Italians to France and to the French.

Nearly every day D'Annunzio went to the Italian Embassy, which was under the direction of Prince Ruspoli, the First Secretary, and had long interviews with him, and with other members of the Italian colony who were doing what they could to aid every undertaking which tended to alleviate the misery and the suffering of the Italian labourers who, having fled from invaded Belgium, were scattered throughout France, striving to return to their native land. It was during these grievous days that D'Annunzio did not hesitate to write an article in which he deplored the absence of the Ambassador, Tommaso Tittoni, who had gone *on a pleasure trip to Norway*. Later on, in *Leda senza Cigno*, he wrote these memorable words: "*Against the grilles of an invisible ambassador there gathers and grows the hunger of the emigrants. Their wait is long and vain. They are impatient.*"

Already, hatred and revolt flash like lightning above their misery, while the human stench mixes with the putrid exhalations of a dying summer."

After the defeat of Charleroi and the retreat of the French Army along the Marne, the days of anguish were impossible to describe. D'Annunzio wrote in after-years: "*The hour of the most cruel sacrifices has struck: the barbarian invasion seemed irresistible.*"

D'Annunzio, like all the rest of us, consoled himself with the reflection that the French forces had not been employed in full, for it was estimated that only three or four hundred thousand men had taken part in the battle of Charleroi, whereas the total strength was something like two million. There was still some ground for hope. Luigi Barzini, war correspondent for the *Corriere della Sera*, took it upon himself to personally destroy what little optimism remained to D'Annunzio. After a short stay in Paris, Barzini had departed for Belgium, and he had no more than set foot in the country than he had been trapped in that lamentable Franco-British retreat, the direct consequence of the defeats of Charleroi and Mons. Barzini was not only a brilliant artist and an excellent journalist, but a specialist in war correspondence. Having followed and lived intimately with the armies of the Russo-Japanese war, he possessed a sort of military insight which permitted him to see clearly what was obscure even to military experts.

Did he witness, between Charleroi and Paris, scenes which convinced him that the French Army was irreparably doomed? Did he converse, on his return to Paris, with people whose interest it was to undermine the morale of the civilian population? Did he see what he saw through eyes which were blinded by the belief that French valour could not prevail against an organisation like the German Army? Whatever the explanation, he came to the apartment on the Avenue Kléber and, in my presence, he exposed to D'Annunzio a situation which was nothing more or less than catastrophic. Not a ray of hope remained when he had finished. He affirmed that the French Army was as good as non-existent and that the Germans would probably be in Paris before the week was out.

The Poet's convictions were sadly shaken. It would have been

asking too much of D'Annunzio's intuitive powers to have expected him to know that, at the moment, two and a half million soldiers were entraining to mass themselves along the Marne from Paris to Verdun under the orders of Joffre and a dozen others; and from that day, determined that he would not leave the city, the Poet prepared for a new siege of Paris. To avoid the risk of rats figuring on our menu as they had on the Paris menus of 1870, he commissioned me to lay in a stock of provisions.

I proceeded to purchase boxes of sardines, all sorts of tinned foods, flour, mineral water, biscuits, condensed milk, jam and everything else findable and keepable. I spent more than 4,000 francs and, considering the purchasing power of a franc in those days, it is easy to see that the house of D'Annunzio contained sufficient supplies to feed all its inhabitants—the Poet, myself, two women servants and twenty-two canaries—for fully a year.

When this was done, D'Annunzio was only worried on one other score—his personal comfort. He was more amused than disturbed by air-raids. Scarcely a day passed without an invitation from a friend to leave Paris by automobile and seek safety in the south of France. No one seemed able to understand that D'Annunzio, who belonged to a neutral nation and possessed a most agreeable villa at Arcachon, could prefer to remain in Paris amid the daily menace of bombs and the likelihood of a siege. Everyone said to me: "Just to think that we are prepared to pay anything for a house outside the danger zone, and that he, not even a Frenchman and having precisely what we lack, insists on staying in this city which is going to be an earthly hell within a few days!" When I replied that this was exactly what appealed to the Poet, they cried: "But that's insane! We must convince him!" I, who knew him well, could not repress a smile. On only one occasion did I see him hesitate, and that was not for the reasons which caused the others to depart: it was when the invitation came from a pretty woman whom he had been courting for several months. The programme was attractive: a villa on the Côte d'Azur, tranquillity and—all the rest! It was, above all, the "rest" which rendered him pensive. Doubtless, the lady had said: "I will be a

sister to you"; but he knew in advance what happened to his sisterly amours. In spite of everything, the intoxication of the war and the perspective of heroic and unexpected sensations won the day. He refused, and the beautiful Omphale had to depart alone.

* * * * *

From that moment he had but one desire: to be authorised to go to the French front and to see the war with his own eyes. He, who had never worried anyone to obtain one of the thousand small favours which we are all of us continually asking, begged in all directions to be allowed to follow the operations, even if he had to go as an ordinary journalist. But his fame, as well as the military situation, rendered this permission more difficult to obtain for him than for another. No general was willing to assume the responsibility of risking the life of the illustrious writer, particularly when the situation was so serious that the Government had left Paris, after placing the city under the command of General Gallieni. The Poet was therefore forced to watch the war from Paris. This was better than nothing, when it is considered that over eight hundred thousand inhabitants had gone south. D'Annunzio wrote: "*The twelve stations of Paris pump courage and cowardice. They are the outlet for those who are going to fight and for those who are running away. With the rapidity lent by fear, the white faces of women with painted eyes and mouths appear, surrounded by boxes and suit-cases, in a disordered flight, as though the first detachment of Uhlans were already at the Porte Dauphine.*" And he concluded: "*We are breathing purer, stronger air; it is as if a vigorous wind had swept away the infection.*"

The fact was the Uhlans were dangerously close to Paris. The city was armed in haste. General Gallieni had three hundred thousand entrenched men. The Government had gone to Bordeaux. Gallieni had issued the famous and laconic proclamation: "I have received the mission to defend Paris against the invader. This mission I shall carry out to the end." Little did D'Annunzio imagine that, five years later, entering Fiume at the head of his Legionaries, he himself would proclaim: "*Since this morning I have assumed the military command of Fiume,*

which I propose to guard and defend to the end, employing all necessary means."

D'Annunzio having sent me to Gallieni with a letter, the General said: "As the grandson of Italians, I am very happy that your great poet proposes so courageously to share our lot. It is just that I do him the honour of treating him as one of us. Tell him that, from this day, I consider him as a French soldier, and that, if the circumstances require it, he will take his chances with the army." "What about me?" I ventured very humbly. "You also," Gallieni replied with a paternal smile. "If necessary, I will provide two uniforms. And now, leave me, for I must work."

The battle of the Marne, "*the unexpected miracle*," as the Poet has called it, began two days later. On the 12th of September, electrified by the victory, D'Annunzio wrote to Captain Gheusi with a frenzy of patriotic fervour which thrilled everyone:

"My dear Friend,

"I am told that you are once more in Paris at the side of our heroic defender. I want badly to see you again.

"Now you are lending your good efforts and your frank ardour not to the 'Ville Morte' ['The Dead City'—one of D'Annunzio's plays directed by Gheusi] but to the 'Ville Vivante' ['The Living City'] which has never been so marvellous. I have been unwilling to leave it. I live by its feverish force, and it seems to me that for the first time it is revealing itself in its entirety to my mind. Each day it becomes more vast, like that tower, begun but not finished by Charles le Chauve, which the Normans, on the day after their furious assault, saw heightened by a floor and strengthened by a third row of loopholes. The heart of Eudes beats again in Gallieni.

"I am sending you to-day a sure messenger, Monsieur Antongini, to ask you for a safe-conduct which will permit me to leave Paris by automobile.

"I will only use it with the greatest discretion and I promise to write about what I may see, only the impressions of a poet, and of a poet who has made of France his second well-beloved country.

"I thank you, my dear friend, and I take both your hands very affectionately in mine.

"Your Gabriele D'Annunzio."

He finally obtained the coveted permission. A few days later, the Poet, availing himself of an automobile which had been offered him by an Italian business man in Paris, accompanied by the latter, myself and another friend (the Count Govone), departed for the French front in the direction of Soissons, crossing the region where the battle of the Marne had taken place. It was at Ferté-sous-Jouarre that D'Annunzio had his first contact with a cannon—a platonic contact, of course.

We had interrupted our journey to pass the night at a farm. We could hear an almost imperceptible rumble in the distance. The chauffeur put his ear to the ground and announced: "Artillery fire, Messieurs," just the way a *maitre d'hôtel* says, "Dinner is served." D'Annunzio's eyes shone. At last! All the night long, the thunder of cannon, sometimes very distinct, sometimes feeble, cradled our dreams. We moved on at dawn. A few hours later we stopped at Longpont, not far from Soissons. Now the rumble of the artillery fire had taken on a solemn tone. The walls of the house where we lunched shook with every shell. D'Annunzio wrote afterwards: "*Longpont resembles one of my little Umbrian towns. It almost made me forget my exile.*"

We came in sight of Soissons while it was being severely bombarded. At the bridge, a sentinel, having examined our papers, said: "The city is being shelled. If you want to go on, you can, but at your own risk. You will no doubt be killed!" D'Annunzio immediately gave the order to proceed, and just as we passed the hospital two projectiles struck the roof. The owner of the automobile remarked, not without wisdom: "Now that we've seen everything, we may as well turn back," but the Poet ignored the suggestion.

When we arrived in the main square, D'Annunzio had his first real view of what war is. A few moments before a shell had struck a wagon, killing the driver and a horse. Blood was spattered in all directions. We stopped. An officer appeared from a house and ran toward us. He asked D'Annunzio: "Who are you and what are you doing here?" "*We are watching the bombardment,*" the Poet replied with a smile as he produced his safe-conduct. By a happy chance, the officer was a passionate reader of D'Annunzio's works. He permitted the Poet to

distribute fifty packages of cigarettes to the soldiers and to collect a dozen cards and letters to be mailed in Paris. The soldiers thanked him and applauded him. This was the beginning of the alliance!

Two hours later we started back. On the outskirts of Soissons we met a superior officer who was going into the city. D'Annunzio asked him naïvely: "*Exactly where is the battle, Colonel?*" "Right here! You're in the middle of it!" D'Annunzio exclaimed incredulously: "*So much the better! I didn't know I was so fortunate!*"

It was a year before he was to learn for himself that modern battles are not like those of 1859 and 1870, and that a battle and an attack are different things.

* * * * *

Now that my reader knows what our trip amounted to, if he will look at D'Annunzio's notes, jotted down *en route*, he will see what happens when the Poet sets down his impressions: "*Wagonloads of fugitives coming back. Horses slaughtered; entrails scattered about. Fields devastated where trembles a single leafy branch. A tattered black cloth waving over a ruined house. Lines of trees like troops in line. Swallows in the canal of the Ourcq. A lantern to mark an improvised bridge. Onions hanging in the windows.*"

"*At Varedes: Men with sacks for cloaks. Telegraph poles with wires down. Wagons of fugitives drawn by oxen. A segment of the black road shining in the rain. The howling of the wind. Angry gusts. Haystacks have sometimes the perfect form of Saracen cupolas. Hills of leaden blue. Great grey horses with knotted tails. Red Cross everywhere. Yellow lights. Green trees. Dead leaves blowing about. Sensation of how easy it is to lose hold on life.*"

"*At Neufchelles: A cat eating the flesh from the bones of a horse. Piles of ammunition. Laughing sunshine on the hills. A statue of Racine near the canal. In the canal, an overturned boat. Shell-shattered houses. A red butcher shop. Red apples. Willows and poplars. White clouds. Damp sky. Roses. Apple-trees laden with ripe fruit.*"

"*At Faverolles: A shadowy square, a little tower, a rooster.*"

"*At Touty: The road is encumbered with artillery. Long*

trains. A lame horse shot at a cross-roads. He falls in his own blood. Soldiers with bayonets. One with a helmet, the head of Achilles. A pick over his shoulder.

"At Corcy: A dead horse. A calm green river with swans. A garden of dahlias. Ambulances. An automobile full of women in mourning. Floating black veils. Tragic faces.

"At Longpont: A cathedral in ruins. Soldiers everywhere. Wagons. Ambulances. Red breeches.

"At Courmelles: From the heights the belfry of the Soissons Cathedral in the valley. All the hills slope down toward the city. One of the spires is broken."

From these notes it can readily be seen that the Poet is entirely sincere and faithful in his portraiture of facts; but when he takes up his pen to describe what he has seen in *Leda senza Cigno*, then his imagination runs riot.

"From the edge of the road, encumbered with wagons of wounded men exposed to enemy fire, I embraced lovingly the city of Clodovic, invisible save for its spires. They rose above the hill which hid the walls. They seemed to be frail prolongations of the hidden city. I thought they trembled every time another cannon roared.

"Suddenly there was a shock, and my eyes were dazzled. The city stopped in its breathing. A human silence fell exactly as when the crowd assembled in the square ceases its clamour to watch the head of the innocent victim roll from the scaffold into the basket of the executioner.

"One of the two spires was cut in two. Now the city lifted toward Heaven but one arm and a stump."

Little does it matter if D'Annunzio did not actually witness the falling of that spire. If the Poet colours what he has seen with a vivid dream, there are many others who dream without having seen at all.

* * * * *

If D'Annunzio smiled incredulously when the Marquise C. assured him that it was impossible for the French to triumph because Joffre passed his days reading novels, and because the French aviators were unable to fly, so intoxicated were they with cocaine, nevertheless he soon took to complaining of the inactivity of the troops, of the inefficiency of the officers, of the

closing of the theatres and the lack of sugar. And, to kill time, he sought to amuse himself.

One day he had the good luck to be arrested!

A most exceptional thing for him, he had gone out alone in the evening, and had lingered at the Pont du Châtelet to watch the sun setting on the water "*which the reflection of white clouds rendered as white as the waters of the Tiber.*"

As usual he was taking notes when a policeman surprised him. In time of peace he could have written a book on the Pont du Châtelet without arousing any suspicions, but in time of war things were very different. D'Annunzio's arguments were of no avail. He was taken to the station. It was natural enough for an ordinary policeman to have ignored the very existence of the Poet, but the *Commissaire* knew well that, in the last two years, two of D'Annunzio's plays had been presented at the Théâtre du Châtelet. He was, of course, released after having accepted profound excuses and having indulged in a cordial conversation. However, in *Gil Blas* the following day there was an article which said that the officer had arrested D'Annunzio by way of vengeance for the night he had spent on duty during which he had been forced to hear the four acts of *Saint-Sébastien*.

Another amusement was the billeting of those Italians who had remained in Paris. This was as costly as it was agreeable, for nearly all these good people asked for help. I will mention none of the visitors except the poor and heroic poet Ricciotto Canudo, who was to die gloriously on the field of honour, in a French uniform, three years later at Monastir. He only wanted money enough to pay for his uniform of the Garibaldian Legion, so that he could rejoin the volunteers who were already fighting in the Argonne under the command of Peppino Garibaldi. But, as I have said, D'Annunzio was not feeling rich, and what little money he was able to procure he spent, as always, on more or less useless things. D'Annunzio said to Canudo: "*I cannot give you any money because I haven't any, but I can place at your disposal a man who, thanks to his consummate cleverness, can obtain your uniform for you without spending a penny.*" I was the man who was supposed to possess powers worthy of Cagliostro. Canudo, who was an old friend of mine, gave me the address of

the tailor where the brand-new uniform was waiting for its owner to come and claim it. After a long and fruitless argument with the obstinate business man, I had recourse to the only plea which could possibly move him—patriotism. I said with pathos: "You must not forget that to-morrow Monsieur Canudo may die for your country!" The tailor replied with a smile: "I know it, and I admire your friend's gesture, but that is precisely the reason why I hesitate to give him credit for his uniform." The excellent D'Annunzio had, as usual, to scrape up the money. To pay for Canudo's uniform he commissioned me to sell the sewing machine, but told me to remove it when the maid was not looking, because he feared her inevitable protests.

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April finally came. Political events were happening fast. Italy sent messenger after messenger to the Poet, as the only man who could bring about her intervention in the war.

The day was approaching when he was going to be able to terminate his voluntary exile by a gesture worthy of him.

Italy, which, but a month before, he had called "*unarmed and irresolute*," was waiting for him.

CHAPTER XVII

D'ANNUNZIO AND HIS COLLABORATORS

Rostand's dream—D'Annunzio "born to music"—The Poet wrecks a musician's home—Alberto Franchetti—Debussy—A hundred sealed letters—Mascagni—Conversations at the Hôtel Scribe—Puccini—The divine woodcock—The ineffable Malipiero—An irritable musician—"You never know!"—"This magnificent and intrepid barbarian"—Three nude women—An artist of the Renaissance—Hérelle as a soft-pedal—The gentle Doderet.

D'ANNUNZIO'S poems, novels, plays, short stories, newspaper articles, speeches, official and intimate letters, notes of thanks or apology, and even his telegrams, whether bearing his signature or not, have, all of them, been written by him, and by him alone.

To collaborate—that is, to divide the responsibility of creation with another brain—has always represented not only a mental but a physical impossibility to the Poet. Even when he has desired to collaborate and has shown the utmost goodwill, he has found himself incapable of it. There are several reasons for this incapacity. The first is his crushing artistic superiority, which, from the outset, annihilates all chance of real collaboration. (To the best of my limited knowledge, neither Goethe nor Victor Hugo ever collaborated with anyone.) The second is that his exceptional qualities as a writer will not permit of the intrusion of heterogeneous elements. The third is the insuperable obstacle of the rare beauty of his most individual language, partly resuscitated, partly created by him for his own use.

Only on one occasion was a true collaboration planned between D'Annunzio and another famous writer, and even that, after numerous and friendly discussions, died in its infancy. It was Edmond Rostand with whom the Poet was to have worked. In the spring of 1912 Rostand proposed that they should write together a tragedy in verse to be entitled *Jeanne d'Arc*. It was with enthusiasm that the two poets discussed the project. The circumstances and, perhaps, the difficulties to which the

materialisation of the idea would have given rise caused this interesting plan, as alluring financially as artistically, to be definitely shelved.

Some time later—in August, 1914, to be exact—I met Edmond Rostand in the offices of the Inspector of Police of the 8th *arrondissement* in Paris. Rostand was applying for a permit in favour of Madame Rostand's English maid to allow her to live in the retrenched camp. The celebrated poet, encased in a snugly-fitting frock-coat such as was worn at the time of Alfred de Musset, and affecting the broad-brimmed hat and flowing black tie, had the youthful aspect of a Latin Quarter student or a provincial fencing master. He recognised me, enquired for D'Annunzio, and chatted about the events of the day. I chanced to refer to the ancient project of collaboration, and of the disappointment of all those who had foretasted the delight which such an artistic repast would have offered. Rostand said with a smile: "I quite understand why D'Annunzio did not see fit to carry out our intentions. As great an artist as he has nothing to gain by associating with anyone, even though it be Edmond Rostand."

If, then, D'Annunzio has never collaborated in the writing of a poem, a novel or a play, he has, on the other hand, entered into many artistic collaborations of another sort. He has continually worked with composers, and such combinations have been particularly justified because of his musical inclination and culture. From his earliest youth he has been an impassioned lover of music, and when he has been seriously ill he has derived infinite pleasure from music. In Venice, in 1915, at the time of his blindness, a quintet of amateurs came each afternoon to play him classical pieces. He himself tells us how he was "born to music" in the following passage: "*I went into the church of San Petronio in Bologna, and the sound of the organ boomed above my head. It was as though Palestrina had drained the depths of my anguish to make of it his musical bread. At that moment I was born to music: I found in music the cause of my being and of my repose—not for its delectation nor its caress, nor to seek oblivion, but for its call to suffering and to a vocation of martyrdom.*" In 1883, in the course of an interview with Amédée Pigeon which appeared in the *Revue Hebdomadaire*, he reaffirmed: "*I have always had a*

great predilection for all music on the clavichord and for the sacred music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. My music master praised and admired antique simplicity. The first perturbations of my adolescence are linked up in my memory with the 'Andantino' of Abbé Michelangelo Rossi. I used to play it tirelessly on the old piano of the Collegio Ciccognini."

In 1884, "exiled" in Pescara, he wrote as follows to Vittorio Pape, a very dear friend, who was a pupil at the Conservatorium of Naples: "Again I am panting for music, oh, dear Vittorio. What torture! I who assiduously frequented all Roman concerts, innumerable and sometimes exceptional; I who am passionately devoted to all the pure and sublime manifestations of musical art; I who have lost myself for hours while listening to Chopin, Beethoven, and Schumann—I, dear Vittorio, have not heard music for almost seven months. Do you understand?"

"In Pescara there is no music, and I refrain from going out on Thursdays and Sundays because I hate bands, and the band in the square is perfectly outrageous. It is so unmusical that even the bronze ears of Don Peppino Postiglione are shocked. Need I say more?"

"I shall have to keep my patience a little longer. In the spring I expect to go to Turin, and from there to Nice. I am told that we shall have excellent music in Turin for the Exhibition. Oh, who will give me back the quintets of Sgambati of the Sala Dante and the small musical gatherings in the microscopic rooms of Tosti in the Via Prefetti?"

He is also a keen and greatly appreciated musical critic. In all of his works he has placed the importance of music very much in the foreground.

It is therefore natural that on frequent occasions he should have had the opportunity of collaborating with composers. He collaborated with Tosti when they were both very young; with Franchetti for the *Figlia di Jorio*; with Debussy for the musical score of *Saint-Sébastien*; with Hildebrando Pizzetti for the incidental music of *Pisanella* and *Fedra*; with Mascagni for *Parisina*; with Zandonai for *Francesca di Rimini*.

The collaboration with Paolo Tosti was limited to a few short compositions adapted to juvenile verses, amongst which *A Vucchella*, a little aria of the *Posillipo*, is the best known. Tosti was living in Rome, and frequently met D'Annunzio, to whom he

was united by a fervid friendship which endured for forty years. D'Annunzio, in his rôle of Don Juan, often availed himself of Tosti's luxurious *garçonnière*, since his modest means prohibited him from maintaining an establishment in conformity with his tastes. The apartment was filled with costly knick-knacks. One sunny day, Tosti, who had wrung from the Poet the promise of some new verses, grew impatient and devised a subtle scheme to inveigle him to his home. The Poet had barely crossed the threshold when Tosti locked him inside, and informed him through the keyhole that he would not be released until he had written an amorous sonnet and slipped it under the door. An hour later, Tosti returned, found the coveted sonnet and, upon entering his flat, almost wept when he saw that D'Annunzio, in a blind rage, had smashed every single curio before sitting down to write the little poem.

The co-operation with Alberto Franchetti was not staged in a setting of destruction. In 1905 the Poet was living at the Capponcina at Settignano, in the Florentine hills. Franchetti had rented a near-by villa the better to further a friendship with a marvellous and mysterious lady whom D'Annunzio lost no time in christening "The Savage." The two artists visited each other frequently until Franchetti expressed the desire to write a score for *Figlia di Jorio*. D'Annunzio joyfully accepted, and Giulio Riccardi, the famous publisher of Milan, added his signature to the contract. It was the first opera based on a D'Annunzian poem, and it promised to be a most profitable business venture. Greatly to the Poet's disgust, he soon discovered that he must write the book anew, since the metre of his tragedy did not lend itself to musical interpretation. He wrote to me: "*At this moment I can hear the rumble of Franchetti's motor. No doubt he is coming to implore me to smash the granite of the Majella and form it into little pills to be taken every hour.*"

The opera was presented on the 29th of March, 1905, at the Scala, in Milan, under the direction of Toscanini. It ran twelve nights and was enthusiastically received, but it fell far short of the expectations of the authors and the publisher.

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In 1912, in Paris, there arose the question of collaboration

with Debussy for the tragedy of *Saint-Sébastien*. The two artists were united by a sympathetic friendship. When the work was nearly ready, D'Annunzio, who was staying at the Hôtel d'Iéna, went to Debussy's villa in the Bois de Boulogne to hear the composition. The Russian painter, Léon Bakst, who was designing the costumes and the sets, was also present. The Poet said to Bakst: "*I feel that Debussy has understood me. He will assuredly produce something admirable. Only an artist of his temperament and his fibre can hope to write music for Saint-Sébastien. The action must be followed carefully, and the atmosphere must be perfectly adapted.*"

The collaboration of the Poet with Hildebrando Pizzetti, christened Hildebrando of Parma by D'Annunzio because he considered the name "Pizzetti" a little ridiculous, was carried on at a distance, for the Poet was at Arcachon and the composer in Italy. While he was working on *Fedra*, Pizzetti wrote forty letters to D'Annunzio in two months. No one save himself ever knew their contents, because the Poet, having neglected to reply to the first one, lacked the courage to open the others. They were nearly all registered. The envelopes piled up but the Poet obstinately ignored them. Eventually, Hildebrando lost his patience and wired: "Desperate. My endurance exhausted. Arriving to-morrow evening." Naturally, it devolved on me to face the furious composer. He arrived, emaciated by his journey. "Has he received my letters?" he asked feverishly. "Yes." "Has he read them?" "Not one." "God be praised! Because if he had read them and failed to answer them he would have been such a malignant monster that I could never have looked at him again."

In 1912 D'Annunzio entered into collaboration with Mascagni. Years before, in a newspaper article, the Poet had dubbed the composer "The Band Master," and Mascagni had never forgiven him. I was frequently present at the verbal jousts between the two artists at the Hôtel Scribe, and I was bubbling over with curiosity to know what D'Annunzio really thought of Mascagni. The truth is that D'Annunzio attached but small importance to any collaboration once his first enthusiasm had passed. He thoroughly appreciated the importance of Mascagni's creative work, but he was not personally inclined towards this

particular type of music. For D'Annunzio the famous modern Italian trinity—Mascagni, Puccini, Leoncavallo—has never existed. During the Parisian interlude, D'Annunzio was chiefly interested by Mascagni's mentality. Mascagni was so stirred by his melodious improvisations on the verses of *Parisina* that he suddenly broke off without reason to strum the remnant of a Tuscan song. All this is what so greatly interested the Poet during the collaboration.

Giacomo Puccini wished on several occasions to collaborate with D'Annunzio, and once his wish was apparently gratified. Puccini having heard that the Poet had manifested his intention of returning to Italy, went to visit him at Arcachon. I was present neither at their first encounter nor at the subsequent meetings, for I was in Paris on business. But on my return I heard from the Poet that the collaboration had *founded in a glass of old Sauterne*. A diverting gastronomic episode! This is D'Annunzio's story: "*Chancing to be in Bordeaux with Puccini, and knowing him for a gourmet of the first order, I took him to the 'Chapon Fin.' The menu included extraordinarily fine game and an even more exceptional salad. Having partaken of a divine woodcock served with a famous sauce which was a speciality of the house, I was about to sip from a glass of old Sauterne which the proprietor had produced in our honour. Before I had lifted it to my lips, the 'maitre d'hôtel' restrained me with the utmost deference and implored me to wait an instant. He served a small piece of Cheshire. I tried it and only then did he permit me to drink. Puccini was smiling ecstatically, for perhaps he had never seen such refinement applied to a repast. Our conversation consequently was diverted from the musical to the culinary art, and there was no further mention of collaboration.*" In all probability the public was thus deprived of some good Puccini.

This chapter would not be complete were I to pass over several other collaborations which never materialised, such as that with Madame Richard Corbin, who was to have put *Sogno d'un Mattino di Primavera* to music. Then there were Raoul Pugno, Nadia Boulenger and Francesco Malipiero who were concerned with *Sogno d'un Tramonto d'Autunno*.

The case of Malipiero is interesting because of the difficulties which arose. The artist Malipiero could not admit that when he

had, *without consulting the author*, written the music for *Sogno d'un Tramonto d'Autunno*, the artist D'Annunzio, aware of the existence of this music, should dare to negotiate elsewhere for the musical rights of the opera. D'Annunzio disliked Malipiero's method of procedure and resented being criticised by the composer because he sought to market his poem advantageously. I have made it clear that D'Annunzio, though an artist, defends his rights ruthlessly. There was a solution which I suggested to Malipiero: namely, that he should bind himself to pay a sum at least approximate to that which the other aspirants were ready to give. Then, it could be hoped that D'Annunzio would give him preference. Malipiero wrote to me by way of reply: "I sense the real drift of your argument. The blow is crushing for me. Having recovered from the shock, I am trying to find a means of solving this intricate puzzle"—continuing in this vein. Then he said: "It would be very hard for me to find myself abandoned merely because some rascally publisher or musician is in a position to offer more than I can afford. Is the *Sogno d'un Tramonto d'Autunno* really like any other vile object put up at auction?" Clearly, Malipiero could only see the situation through his own eyes and from his own point of view. He wrote: "There is this much more to be said. None of these stockbroker musicians are capable of setting the song to music in its present form because it is not in verse and because none of our contemporary lions can adapt their music to it. Not one would have the courage to write music for women alone, without a tenor or at least a baritone." And he concluded: "In a fortnight I have written in final form a good part of the music which has haunted me for years and not even your letter has destroyed my courage. I shall go on to the bitter end. The music is good. It will live, and it will remain a proof of my faith and enthusiasm for the Poet, who is one of the men who have made me suffer most."

D'Annunzio wrote to me from Arcachon: "*The ineffable Malipiero sends me touching postcards from Asolo.*" Later, when I informed him of the sad details, he said: "*If Malipiero wishes to amuse himself by setting works to music without first consulting the authors, it is no fault of mine. Why does he not write a score for the Odyssey or Paradise Lost? He would have no trouble at all, and*

he would not place me in a painful dilemma where I must give up an immediate profit which will help to keep my library from going under the hammer of the auctioneer or cause sorrow to a colleague in art."

The contracts with Madame Richard Corbin and Raoul Pugno were amply provided with those clauses which D'Annunzio never overlooks, even when his faith in the financial success is not too strong. "You never know," he says. "You never know, no matter how insignificant the case may be."

D'Annunzio and Richard Strauss discussed a collaboration. In 1913 they were brought together by Renzo Sonzogno, the head of the firm of music publishers of that name. The Poet had always had great sympathy with and admiration for Richard Strauss. In 1906, at a banquet in Milan in honour of the great composer, D'Annunzio said: *"This magnificent and intrepid barbarian with the light eyes pleases me particularly for his fighting qualities, which makes him akin to my Greeks. Like the tragedians of the Dionysian Theatre, he never composes unless with a view to conquest. His art is that of a warrior: he is also a gladiator. Because of this I consider him worthy of being crowned with laurels grown on the shores of the Mediterranean. The applause with which you have greeted him confirms my views, and we, at this Latin board, may drink with joy to his coming coronation."*

Nevertheless, Richard Strauss could not bring himself to the adaptation of an existent D'Annunzio play. He wanted something new and, above all, modern, and for some time there was every reason to believe that his dream would be realised. D'Annunzio had selected an ultra-modern theme—as background the celebrated *boîtes de nuit* of Montmartre. Richard Strauss hailed the idea with enthusiasm, and was to meet the Poet in Paris to discuss further details. Unfortunately, circumstances intervened and art lovers were deprived of what would surely have been a beautiful piece of work.

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I now come to two categories of collaborators not generally qualified as such. I am speaking of illustrators and translators. Ordinarily, the artist who designs the cover and illustrates the text of a book is chosen by the publisher and the author does not

necessarily see his work until after publication. The translator is an even more obscure means to an end.

But if Gabriele D'Annunzio differed from other authors in a thousand ways, he differed again in both these cases. He attached enormous importance to the illustrations which accompany his works, and he always insisted upon having the last word in their selection. Once only, a publisher—believing that he could do as he saw fit—chose the jacket for D'Annunzio's *Il Libro delle Vergini*, and put the book in circulation without consulting the Poet. This cover represented three nude women in provocative attitudes. D'Annunzio was accused of pornography. He vigorously defended himself and denounced the culprit in a letter which was followed by a trial which resulted in the imprisonment of the publisher.

From that day publishers realised that D'Annunzio was to be reckoned with at every turn. He selected his illustrators and they collaborated with him in the strict sense of the word. There have been many. Of them all, the most important was Adolpho de Carolis, *primus inter pares*. For twenty years he was D'Annunzio's official illustrator—the only one who gave the Poet entire satisfaction—and, apart from their artistic accord, they were bound by an active and fruitful friendship. The name of Carolis is bracketed with that of D'Annunzio on nearly all the jackets. Conscious of his artistic value to the Poet, Carolis, nevertheless, always behaved like a disciple in his presence.

There have been comparatively few translators. For the French language, Monsieur Georges Hérèlle, professor at the Lycée of Bayonne, and André Doderet are entitled to the first rank. The collaboration of the former lasted from 1891 to 1916. In the autumn of 1891 Hérèlle read, in a Naples newspaper, a few chapters of *L'Innocente*. He wrote to D'Annunzio offering his services as translator. The *Temps* published the translation under the title *L'Intrus*. So satisfied with Hérèlle was the Poet that it never occurred to him to think of an eventual successor. He criticised Hérèlle for softening the crude force of his phrases in an effort to obtain the subtle shade of correctness and purity, but he admitted that, if his personality was obscured, the result was, nevertheless, an increased sale of his works in French.

When D'Annunzio wrote *Forse che sì, forse che no*, a woman friend proposed to translate it. The Poet accepted and thus deserted the faithful Hérelle. The style of this translation stands out above all the others, but it must be said that D'Annunzio, a master of French himself, stood by the side of the translator while she worked, and, further, had the manuscript corrected by a talented French author, Charles Muller. The reading public noticed the change and, generally speaking, disapproved of it. It is likely that D'Annunzio would have returned to Hérelle had not a new French writer—André Doderet—appeared upon the horizon. Doderet came to me when I was Secretary of the Naval Attaché in Paris.

The relationship between Doderet and D'Annunzio was rapidly established, and Doderet soon came to Italy. As well as becoming the Poet's official translator, Doderet became a devoted friend upon whom D'Annunzio could always count. Their collaboration, greatly facilitated by the long periods spent by Doderet at Gardone with the Poet, gave promise of infinite harmony.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE POET'S CORRESPONDENCE

The diabolical trays—A virgin—The mysterious blue envelope—Misunderstood colleagues—Threatening missives—D'Annunzio and the French 'Bluebeard'—The wounded corpse—A clever trick—The Poet's mammas—A woman who enjoyed being beaten—Choice of mottoes—D'Annunzio, 'King of Cilicia'—The Poet and the mad people—"The Room of the Stump."

FOR more than fifty years Gabriele D'Annunzio has received daily an average of fifty letters, twenty-five telegrams, twenty postcards, a dozen packages, fifty newspapers, fifteen books and manuscripts. For lovers of statistics, it is worth noting that, in the course of his career, he has received over a million and a half letters. Allowing him three minutes to read a letter and ten to reply, we find that, had he endeavoured to satisfy the admirers and simpletons of the world, he would have been forced to allot twelve hours out of twenty-four to his correspondence. And because the other twelve hours must have been devoted to rest and nourishment, we conclude that, from the age of twenty, he would have done nothing but send letters and telegrams, open and acknowledge gifts and review books and manuscripts.

Instead of perpetrating such criminal waste of talent and energy, the Poet has given us more than fifty works, of which some thirty each have of from three hundred and fifty to four hundred pages, and have been dramatised and presented. He gave four years and the sight of one eye to the war; he conquered Fiume and governed it for two years, and he has found time, in addition, to make love—and what love!—to countless women.

Bearing in mind that he has never made use of a stenographer or a dictaphone, it will be interesting to see by what ingenious methods he has managed to solve the problem of correspondence. My readers are liable to ask at this point just what I accomplished in my capacity of private secretary if I was hardly ever entrusted with the reply to a letter. No; my duties consisted in dealing with his publishers and theatrical managers and

attending to his business. They further embraced the investigation of the material required for his work and a constant search for volumes which contained data essential to him. I also had to protect his independence and display courtesy to those who might eventually be of service to him, the while eliminating all people and things likely to injure his interests or even to cause him a waste of time. I read and indexed the correspondence and commented upon it, but to answer it was strictly D'Annunzio's affair.

The Poet has always regarded the post as an unavoidable calamity like rain or cold or heat, but not as a means of contact with the outside world. He accepts his quota of letters and telegrams with gentle stoicism, and he has donated a small fortune in tips for the postman, because the letters are generally registered and the wires are marked "Urgent." He welcomes his letters as he welcomes a visitor—with a smile. As they accumulate in the course of the day, the letters are placed on various trays in different parts of the house, save when the Poet remains locked in his study for days and weeks on end. No one opens them unless orders are received to do so. The look which D'Annunzio bestows on these diabolical trays when he chances to notice them is really amusing. It is a combination of resignation and of pity—the pity being intended for the senders of the letters—and it is always unexpectedly, just when he is going out or when it is time for dinner, that he sets about the perusal of this correspondence.

The envelopes, apart from those addressed in a hand which he recognises, are first turned and twisted and even smelled with feline circumspection. If letters had souls they would tremble during that examination, which is as searching as that which virgins undergo when the Pasha elects them for his harem. And if D'Annunzio tosses an unopened letter to one side, this letter, though it will never be destroyed, is relegated, like a spinster, to miserable obscurity. On rare occasions I have yielded to a scientific rather than a morbid curiosity and have read one of these rejected missives, and, like the callow youth or the old libertine, I have without exception been disillusioned. I have found requests for photographs, invitations to exhibitions, demands for charity, and yet the envelopes have differed in no

way from those containing declarations of love or cheques from editors. It is well known and conceded that D'Annunzio possesses a subconscious sense which warns him as to the advisability of accepting a proposal. This holds true for the opening of his mail.

One day in Arcachon I handed him three letters which had just arrived. He was about to leave the dining-room. Two of the epistles had white envelopes and the third was encased in a passionate blue of fantastic shape and dimensions. The address on the latter had surely been penned by a woman in an elegant, sloping hand. The ink was a rich dark blue and the seal bore a crest on blue wax. I was ready to stake my last sou that D'Annunzio would be intrigued. To my amazement, he slowly opened the two white envelopes and read the letters with great interest. He completely ignored the blue one. As at that time I frequently opened his correspondence, I was able to satisfy my curiosity. And I found—a bill from a *Paris modiste*! I am certain that the Poet had never before seen either the stationery or the handwriting.

He has always been swamped with messages from unfortunate and misunderstood authors who count on him to find a publisher or to point out the faults in the manuscript which is forwarded under separate cover. The fate of these pathetic pleas is a foregone conclusion: they end in some remote corner of the house. No injury is done. Despite the fact that the Poet is absolutely intractable in his refusal to read manuscripts, he nevertheless continues to receive quantities to this very day. One day in Milan, in a famous café frequented principally by literary men and artists, one of these self-dubbed poets asked me, in the presence of several people, to explain D'Annunzio's procedure with regard to correspondence. Evident though it was that this question was asked for personal reasons, I told him exactly this: "Immediately on arrival, D'Annunzio's correspondence is placed in a box marked 'Recent Letters.' Beside it is a box marked 'Less Recent Letters,' and still another is marked 'Letters of Long Date.' All letters found in box 1 are moved into box 2 and from box 2 to box 3 when a new delivery is made. When box 3 is full its contents are taken to a room where letters have been accumulating for years and

which are never read." And I concluded: "As you see, this is an ideal system, because the Poet's correspondence is never neglected, and he is in a position to answer whom he pleases when he pleases. The fact is that he 'answers' only those who never write, for they hold a high place in his esteem and affection."

Certain people, thinking to play on D'Annunzio's emotions, send him requests for autographs and photographs in letters purporting to be written by their children. Here is a masterpiece attributed to a boy of seven: "Dear Poet,—Since your intelligence and lofty doctrine have allowed you to produce such notable works——" And another: "Dear Gabriele,—I am a small boy, but my lips tremble when they pronounce the name of the imaginative songster of our race, of the one who has drawn supreme melodies from the surge of the Mediterranean waves." And just one more: "Permit me, O Poet, to deposit a little kiss on your brow, which droops under the weighty laurels of your glory."

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Most people are in doubt as to how to address D'Annunzio. "Poet" or "Excellency," followed by an exclamation mark, is a common title. At Fiume he was sometimes called "Sire," but this failed to move him. And perhaps the most charming of all: a manager of a small theatre, having begun his letter with "Divine Poet," finished with: "Meanwhile I await a favourable reception from Your Divinity and I avail myself of this occasion to say to you very respectfully: Hello! Hello!"

The women who write him, with the exception of those known to him, are usually intrigued by his perversity both as a writer and a man. We are all ready to admit that what is forbidden, criminal, or corrupt, exercises an irresistible fascination on the feminine mind. A criminal like Landru, the French 'Bluebeard,' received hundreds, if not thousands of letters from women while he was in prison, but I am safe in saying that Pasteur or Thomas Edison were never greatly overworked with the reading of epistles from female admirers. This very special correspondence is not intended for the D'Annunzio who wrote *Laus Vitæ* or *Contemplazione della Morte*, but for the D'Annunzio of Dame

Legend—the cruel and vicious D'Annunzio, the incomparable expounder of incest and complicated adultery. To these missives, whether tender or exalted, supplicating or violent, D'Annunzio never replies. Where women are concerned, he is cold to the seduction of anonymity. He likes experiments *de visu*; he prefers to besiege and conquer than to be besieged and conquered.

Contrary to what may be supposed, the Poet has never been inundated with declarations of love from mad women. I am inclined to account for this by the probable difficulty experienced by even the most wily and audacious in finding words and style appropriate for a letter to a poet of such renown. A secondary reason is probably the fear of becoming ridiculous in the eyes of that other woman at the moment in the coveted position of "mistress-in-chief." But my statement that the Poet has not been swamped by amorous protestations is, of course, purely relative: for instance, he has never attained the success of a cinema star or a heavyweight boxing champion, though he certainly has a better record than a travelling salesman for a lingerie house. But of such letters ninety per cent have been conceived by unbalanced females, one jump ahead of an asylum.

One such poor woman was a veritable affliction during all of D'Annunzio's royal sojourn in Fiume. It was a bearable affliction, for the *Comandante* glanced and smiled at the effusions before throwing them into the waste basket, from which I sometimes extracted them with the idea of studying them from a psychological point of view. The unknown lady sought to conquer the Poet anew, for she claimed that he had loved her in another age, and she described in detail passionate passages of the romance. The last letter contained a vague threat. A week later an unidentified body was recovered from the river by the Legionaries. I went to the *morgue* and found a young woman, delicate of feature and evidently of the better class. A few days later I mentioned my visit to D'Annunzio. He said:

"*You should have told me at the time.*" "Why?" I asked. "*Because I would have accompanied you and I would have known at once whether she was responsible for those letters.*" "But how could you have determined that?" "*None of your business,*" he replied. Ten years later, at Gardone, D'Annunzio alluded to this

incident. A mutual friend was staying at the Vittoriale and he spoke jestingly of a woman who was continually threatening to commit suicide. D'Annunzio said: "*Anyone who keeps repeating such a threat will never carry it out—unless she is mad. Do you remember, Tom, the girl who threw herself into the Eneo?*" And he explained to our friend: "*Tom failed to let me know in time and it annoyed me because I could have identified her. In one of her last letters she wrote: 'Yesterday I cut myself deeply in the palm of the left hand. As I watched the blood pulsing from the wound, I said to myself: "With what joy I would give all of it for you!"'*" And the Poet concluded: "*This should serve as a proof to both of you that I never forget anything.*"

When we were at the Hôtel Meurice, in Paris, D'Annunzio received a letter in a pretty grey envelope from a dancer asking him to get her an engagement at a theatre. The letter was so full of ingenuousness and youth that, when he had read it over, he said: "*Mon Dieu! The poor little thing—you had better go and see her. Perhaps she really deserves our help—there is such endless hidden misery in the world!*" Properly translated, this meant: "Take a look at her. If she's pretty and interesting, perhaps I can do something for her." I set out on my charitable mission. I was ushered into a small and modest *salon* in a shabby house on the rue de Rennes. In the midst of a collection of old fans, faded pictures and programmes of costume balls, there was a photograph of a lovely girl of about twenty in evening dress. And I thought: "If this is our dancer, we have made a discovery." At that moment a woman of uncertain age appeared and, learning that D'Annunzio had sent me, she told me that she was the ballet dancer and then proceeded to outline a long career dating from her infancy in Neufchâtel. It took her more than two hours to tell her story, which served only to tell me that the pretty girl of the photograph was her daughter, that she was not a dancer and that she was in Brazil. That night at dinner I made no mention of my visit to D'Annunzio, but over the dessert he asked: "*Did you see the ballet dancer?*" "What ballet dancer?" "Good Lord!" he exclaimed, "*the ballet dancer who wrote this morning. What is the matter? Have you lost your mind?*" "Oh!" I said. "Yes, I saw her. She's—well, she's insignificant—she's—" The next day it was

apparent that D'Annunzio was seeking a pretext to go out alone. He disappeared and we met again at dinner. When we were seated he glared across the table at me and, stressing every word, said: "*I'll admit the joke's on me this time. But—you wait!*"

* * * * *

Many women have addressed to D'Annunzio letters full of advice, letters preaching virtue, letters seeking to save his soul. But these would-be mothers have lost hope in the course of years. I suppose that they sigh resignedly and say: "And he has so many excellent qualities. What a fine man he would have been if he had been properly looked after in his youth."

Then there are women who regard him as a great spiritual specialist, as a physician of souls, as a miracle-worker. One good lady wrote: "I would like you, illustrious *Maître*, to explain to me how to obtain a divorce, now that it is no longer possible to get one in Fiume, which you have so gloriously conquered single-handed. I would be profoundly grateful to you, because life with my husband, for many reasons which I dare not confide even to you, has become quite impossible." And a Cuban wrote: "My little girl, who is five years old, is tired of reciting the traditional 'Ave Maria' every evening. Is it too presumptuous, Eminent Poet, to beg in favour of this little one, who is already lisping your name, for a substitute for the 'Ave Maria' better adapted to her age? The child, I warn you, is very intelligent, and you will realise this when I tell you that she asks what is the *fructus ventris*. I cannot possibly explain it to her. Many thanks in advance."

One woman ended her letter as if D'Annunzio had been an uncle or at least a cousin: "—My eldest son has now finished his schooling; therefore the matter is urgent. The second is only fourteen, so there is no great hurry." A lady in Milan, asking for the recipe for a famous Abruzzi dish in rhyme, explained "our customary guests are all sincere admirers of yours and you can imagine the pleasure this would give them." Still another wrote: "You who know all the secrets of the feminine heart, can you explain to me why I so enjoy being

beaten? Please reply to L.G., Poste Restante, Carrara, where I shall be until the 18th." D'Annunzio suggested to me: "*Why not give her address to X? One should never hesitate when one can confer such happiness on two people.*"

It is difficult to anticipate how D'Annunzio will react when he is asked for an autograph. He is likely to disregard the request of a great personage and send an autographed volume by express to a labourer or a soldier. He attaches extreme importance to the method of approach, and he detects spontaneity and sincerity without fail. Those who imitate his style are condemned in advance, but if they are guilty of an amusing grammatical error, he is immediately in a good humour.

He himself, in letter-writing, is never concise. Of the eight hundred letters he has sent to me, there are not more than twenty of less than two pages and most of them are eight or more. But there is one invention to which D'Annunzio owes a debt of gratitude: the telegraph. It is his link with the outside world. I have seen him fire off, like a machine gun, as many as one hundred long telegrams at one sitting. Once he has accomplished such a feat, he is as happy or as proud as the Emperor Titus, for he feels that his day has not been wasted; and these telegrams, written at the same hour, invariably contain contrary statements: one declares that he is confined to his bed; another pictures him dismounting from his horse; a third insists that he is old and sad; a fourth promises that he has never felt so young and vigorous. For him the composition of a telegram is as important as the plot of a novel. It is a creation, and a creation which varies according to persons and circumstances. Sometimes he resorts to sibylline wires in the assurance that the recipient will never dare ask for an explanation.

The Paris correspondent of the Hearst papers wired to me in Gardone with reference to business, and ended by asking whether there was any truth in the rumour that D'Annunzio contemplated a divorce and a consequent second marriage. I handed the message to the Poet, who read it attentively and then gave me instructions as to the business in question but with no reference to the divorce. I called his attention to the necessity of making a reply to avoid a possibly damaging report. D'Annunzio, who had no idea of seeking a divorce, and even

less of taking a second wife, ended his telegram as follows:
 "——. *Wife non-existent.*"

Another favourite ruse of his is to conclude a wire with "*Letter follows.*" The letter never does follow, but the recipient is enchanted, because he can always show the telegram to his friends and boast of his intimacy with the Poet. He almost always marks the wires "*Urgent,*" because he has little faith in simple telegrams, just as he trusts only registered letters and scoffs at postcards as being certain to go astray, although he receives a stack of them every day of his life.

All D'Annunzio's letters are sealed, generally with dark blue wax. The choice of the motto is of great importance. As he possesses some twenty seals, he has something fitting for every contingency. When writing to a woman he never employs a superb motto such as "*Aut Cæsar, aut nihil*" or "*Semper adamas.*" He is more likely to use "*Io ho quel che ho donato*" or "*Memento audere semper.*" When writing to a *nouveau riche*, a "blood-sucker," or to someone to whom he momentarily owes consideration, he employs the seal of Montenevoso. If his letter is destined for some poor soul, "*Sufficit animus*" fits admirably. I noticed on one of his letters to me that he had inadvertently written on paper stamped with "*Me ne frego*" ("I do not care"). He had run his pen through this motto in a desire to avoid a contradiction in terms.

In giving letters of introduction, he leaves the envelopes unsealed so that the interested person may judge of his generosity, but if the person is someone who bores him or in whom he has little faith, he sends a telegram to the addressee and, if this afterthought does not take away all the force from his recommendation, it detracts from it considerably. He has always objected violently to any publicity in regard to his letters, even those of but secondary importance. A high official once made the mistake of allowing one of D'Annunzio's letters to get into print, and the Poet said of him: "*I never want to see him again.*" It matters little that he received this culprit with extreme cordiality but a short time after.

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For their own sakes, I sincerely hope that few famous men

have received such scatter-brained and erratic epistles as has D'Annunzio. In the same way that his fame permits him to approach whom he pleases by letter or in person, so, by a sort of reciprocity, the strangest people imagine that they can write to D'Annunzio for any or no reason and whenever the spirit moves them.

By the same post he received a request for twenty lire and the offer of a throne. In that turbulent period following the war, and particularly during the occupation of Fiume, there were more offers of thrones than requests for money. He has never been invited to be King of France or Emperor of Germany, but the thrones—for thrones they are—of Tauride, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan have all been at his disposal at one time or another. D'Annunzio has never taken these offers with anything but a smile—not a smile of incredulity, but one which conveyed the impossibility of his journeying to a foreign land to wear a crown. In the name of the inhabitants, a Russian ex-general repeatedly offered him Cilicia, and he was so insistent that, for a time, I wondered how the Poet could refuse.

While I am speaking of strange letters on strange subjects, let us glimpse at the work of mad people. It would seem that the torch of D'Annunzio attracts fools just as a lamp at night attracts moths. There have been many of these epistles, and they are not confined to any one period or to any particular subject. The flight over Vienna and the performance of *Saint-Sébastien* inspired a voluminous correspondence. Poets are numerous among the madmen who feel it necessary to tell D'Annunzio what they think and many of them call him simply "Dear and illustrious colleague." Here is one example, selected from the many:

"D'Annunzio in the Air.

"A new Tyrtæus, a son of the Abruzzi,
Sings his martial songs in the midst of arms
And, from the clouds, looks with piercing eyes
Upon the people inspired by his words.

And his energy knows no limits,
For he crosses plains and surmounts summits,
Although the song of the Poet, if I am right,
Does not announce the day, for he is neither cock nor ostrich.

Nevertheless, by arguments of Logic
He manages to conquer the Austrians
On the great rivers of Rhetoric.

And he encourages the troops by his hot words,
A veritable Tyrtæus, with this one difference,
That the one walked on foot and the other flies in air."

There was a school-teacher (Heaven help the pupils!) in a town of Southern Italy who sent him hundreds of pamphlets of the queerest verses ever produced by the human mind; and if many of the insane letters were brief, there have been others which have filled forty closely written pages. Many—women for the most part—relate their dreams and visions with horrifying details, while others strive to arouse D'Annunzio's interest by the story of their personal vicissitudes. I well remember one who wrote regularly of her hallucinations.

"I see monstrous angels kneeling, mocking a priest in his pulpit, and one of them is Rostand!

"I see the officers of the King laughing behind a mirror.

"An immense match kindles the sky.

"I see a Paradise of Devils. One monster is their king. You are that monster.

"Look at the Gospel if you have never looked at it before; look at the signs of the approaching end of the world.

"Ah! Now I see the Antichrist crowned with roses. That is you!"

Another wrote:

"Phœbus! Yesterday evening, at the moment when I put out the electric light and was about to sleep, there appeared to me for the second time our poet Dante Alighieri. He did not wear his cowl, hence I could see his forehead and his eyes. They were thy portrait.

"He carried two keys in his hand. With one he nervously

tried to open the gates of thy house in Rome. The other key dropped to the floor; it measured forty or fifty inches and it had a circumference of two inches."

This letter, which was of considerable length, was signed "Fata Anella."

Another correspondent, who for years contributed sheets of political arguments, wrote at the end of October, 1922, the day after the march on Rome:

"Between the 28th and the 29th, as I was feeling better, I wrote to our beloved brother, Benito Mussolini, that I was ready to accompany thee to Rome for the 23rd, manifesting thereby an act of faith on our part, which I had previously explained to thee.

"I knew nothing of the call to Rome of dear Mussolini. I heard of it very late, and realised at once that it would be impossible to write in good time and arrange matters with thee."

Another woman also made various predictions, and one of them was verified in singular fashion four years later:

"The peace of the world will be blessed by him whom God left in His stead to propagate His mysterious doctrines.

"It will be blessed by the Pope; *the claustration of that one will then be lifted as henceforth useless*. Thus will be effected the holy pacific union which God manifested to me from the beginning of the war, although I did not then understand how it would come about; that is, with the triumph of Right, Justice, Work, the Union of Church and Country, of the Pope and King."

The addresses of these letters are absolutely stupefying. Here are a few outstanding examples:

"To Gabriele D'Annunzio, foremost poet
In the World."

"To the great Colonel D'Annunzio,
Barracks of the Geniuses."

"To D'Annunzio, poet, Gabriele,
In his villa—Théâtre du Châtelet—at the Capponcina—
at the sea—PARIS—I can't remember any more!"

"To the Knight of Humanity
On the Lake where he lives."

One, who disapproved the flight over Vienna because it was

bloodless, wrote a letter of recrimination: "Bombs for the Germans! Not scraps of paper! It is time to make an end of plenary indulgence."

Finally, one who had a bone to pick with the income-tax collector finished plaintively: "I am told you don't pay taxes. How do you manage it?" D'Annunzio turned to me and said: "*You see? This also is a legend which should be squashed. If he but knew that they want me to pay the tax on the donation which I have made to the State, of my Vittoriale! I must wire that to him. It will make him happy, poor devil!*"

* * * * *

On the second floor of the Vittoriale there is a room which the Poet originally intended for the use of his guests. He affirms that in the severe walnut bookcases which line the walls are all the letters he has received in the last twenty years. I have not verified this statement, of which I frankly question the strict truth, but at a casual glance the bookcases seem to be filled with papers rather than letters. In the middle of the room there is a table of walnut upon which there is an *inkstand without ink and without a pen*. On the door is carved: "The Room of the Stump."

One day I was showing the Vittoriale to some friends, all warm admirers of D'Annunzio. When they saw this room they all agreed that it was quite reasonable that a man of the Poet's talent should not dedicate his life to answering absurd letters. A few hours later I came upon one of these visitors writing away for dear life in the library at the hotel.

"What are you up to?" I asked.

"I am writing to D'Annunzio to express my admiration for that grand, that prodigious creation which is the Vittoriale. You'll see! He will read my letter and he will be very much pleased!"

CHAPTER XIX

D'ANNUNZIO AND POLITICS

The Poet's "Violon d'Ingres"—D'Annunzio's patriotism—The brains of a Marquis—"I am capable of everything!"—"The sour human stenches"—The tongues and eyes of two Italian deputies—The lions' den—Bologna sausage—The Deputy of Beauty—A wary publisher—The policy of an irresponsible adventurer—The aviator Keller imitates General Cambronne—The most pointless of the post-war conferences—A historic letter from D'Annunzio to Mussolini—The Prince of Youth—The Tarpeian Rock.

THE French have given the name "Violon d'Ingres" to the preference which men, and artists in particular, nourish for that special branch of knowledge in which they least shine.

Politics have always been D'Annunzio's "Violon d'Ingres." The best advice one can give to anyone desirous of getting on D'Annunzio's soft side by flattering his vanity or appealing to his sympathies is not to laud his verses or wax enthusiastic over his dramas—a procedure likely to annoy him—but simply to assure him that he possesses superlative political acumen which, had he so desired, would have made him a successful competitor of Disraeli or of Talleyrand.

However fulsome such flattery may be, he never rejects it.

The primary reason for this weakness is that his brain never established a line of demarcation between politics of the *heart*—politics, that is, inspired by and overflowing with, a pure and ever-vigilant patriotism, such as he feels himself—and politics in the actual sense, that is, the *science or art of Government*.

It is true that there have been numerous examples in history of individuals like Cavour who combined enlightened patriotism with eminent political qualities.

But there are also heroic or upright patriots who, directly they enter Parliament or take a direct part in politics, seem to lose their combativeness, even their entire personality; Garibaldi was a case in point.

There can be no doubt now—if doubt there ever was—of

D'Annunzio's claim to patriotism in the finest sense of the word.

His pure and burning patriotism has been displayed on countless occasions, quite apart from the many heroic acts of his military career. From early youth his mind has been filled with the dream of a mother-country, great, powerful and respected; and with a bitter fear lest that dream might be only partially realised.

A letter which dates back to his fourteenth year gives proof of the strength of his feeling and, although parts of it have been quoted already, it deserves to be published in its entirety.

This letter is dated the 22nd of March, 1877, and is addressed to a much-loved master: "*You will not have forgotten that, on the day I left you, you said to me: 'Study, Gabriele, and be a credit to your country, your family and myself.'*"

"I shall always carry these words in my heart and bear you eternal gratitude for them.

"Do not think that they were said in vain. Oh no! You know how much I love our Italy; you know that I would give everything for her, and you also know that it is you and my father who have planted these principles in my heart. To doubt me would be an insult.

"My first mission on this earth is to teach our people to love their country and to be honest citizens; the second is to hate unto death the enemies of Italy and to fight them on every occasion.

"Ah! If all Italians were like me, these enemies would have to pay a bitter price for all the blood that has been shed through their vileness and treachery!

"Infamous ones! May you be shamed and cursed for ever!"

The lofty feelings which he expressed in that letter are confirmed for D'Annunzio by subsequent events.

He raised a cry of alarm, and demanded greater sea-power for the Italian Navy, in *L'Armata d'Italia* ("The Italian Fleet"), published by him in 1888, at a moment of indolent national policy. He returned to the charge in *Odi Navale*, published at the death of Admiral di Saint-Bon in 1892.

His frequent manifestations of Irredentism—a question which, to his mind, was inseparable from the harassing capital problem of the possession of the "bitter Adriatic"—prove abundantly that

his convictions and his outlook have not been affected by time.

Perhaps Italy was not aware of it, but Austria realised it only too well, for she banned the Poet from her territory.

In 1904, when Dr. Hans Barth, Rome correspondent of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, asked D'Annunzio for an opinion on certain differences which had arisen, between Italy and Germany some time earlier at Innsbruck, he received the following answer:

"My dear Sir,—

"You know that I am not, in general, a dispassionate judge. On this particular question I am a most partial one. Were I to express my thoughts and my judgment, as well as my feelings, with regard to what happened at Innsbruck, you would certainly not be able to transmit my opinions to the German papers. I therefore prefer silence. One of my odes to Trient finishes with this line, 'Silence fosters heroes.' "

Even on the vexed Roman question he found means to express his views publicly with his usual outspokenness, for when inaugurating a commemorative tablet to King Umberto at Teramo in 1899, on the occasion of the anniversary of the 20th September, and having been requested to compose a fitting epitaph, he wrote:

"On the thirtieth anniversary of the sacred day—to the fate of Rome and to the imminent fortunes of Italy—the People of Teramo—renew their faithful vows—commemorating the King, who had faith—in the sanctity of that which was acquired—and is not to be touched."

This disturbed the Prefect of Teramo to such a degree (*O tempora! O mores!*) that a conflict arose between the Municipal Council and the representative of the Government.

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There is no need for me to resort to further quotations in order to prove that he can never remain indifferent to any question that appears to him vital to his country. There is no doubt that a smile was raised [see next page], even in those early days when a programme of national policy, indubitably tinged with Imperialism, was already maturing in his mind—a programme astounding at an epoch when the most eminent statesmen thought as little of territorial aggrandisement as those of to-day

think of the possibility of establishing contact with the inhabitants of Mars, and when the *mere expression of the hope* that Italy might one day treat on equal terms with the great Powers of the world.

Dealing in one of his articles, in 1900, with the Imperial policy of England and Germany, D'Annunzio wrote:

"In the midst of that immense struggle of will and interests, what becomes of those small and timorous combinations which are concealed in the desiccated folds of the brain of that Marquis to whom are entrusted the fortunes of the Italian realm?"

"What spoken word can ever ring out in the foul atmosphere in which the Marchese Visconti-Venosta from time to time makes mention of a country called Italy, in the hushed tones one uses to commemorate someone long since dead?"

These words were written by D'Annunzio during his parliamentary career, and we must not anticipate.

The first time that he showed a desire to devote himself to a militant policy was in 1896, when he received a proposal to stand as deputy for the constituency of Ortona a Mare.

But it was not the first time, as we have seen, that he took an interest in the Italian Chamber of Deputies and passed judgment upon it. He had frequent opportunities of dealing with the question.

As far back as 1886 (nearly eleven years earlier) his opinion of the representatives of the Sovereign People "was anything but flattering."

"The newly elected," he wrote with regard to the inauguration of a Parliamentary session, *"are easily recognisable. Many have a miserable provincial aspect and look awkward in their black evening clothes, their stiff shirts, their white gloves. They glance about them suspiciously, afraid of catching an ironical smile on the lips of some colleague. They feel their hearts beating when they think of the moment when their name will fall from the bearded lips of the Hon. Depretis. How will their voice sound when they pronounce 'I swear'? And what if it were to fail them? If it were too loud? Or squeaky? And what would happen if they provoked hilarity? Heavens! what uncertainty!"*

"Some of them, more courageous, and already a prey to their ambitions, are elaborating various plans. Even in pronouncing

that simple 'I swear' they will attract attention. They will speak clearly in a vibrant and sonorous voice, and will underline the strength of their allegiance with a resolute gesture.

"Others are dreaming or watching the red Tribune of the Queen with astonished eyes. Some day they will suddenly rise from their benches, and in one instant cause the downfall of the Ministry with one great speech, a speech that will inflame the whole of Italy.

"Others are moved. They feel a strange tremor rising to their lips."

* * * * *

It is a matter of common knowledge that D'Annunzio was elected and entered Parliament as the representative of his native region.

Let us deal briefly with the first and only phase of D'Annunzio's parliamentary career, which lasted only from 1897 to 1900; in the latter year he presented himself again for election and was defeated.

The political, even more than the parliamentary, attitude of the Hon. Gabriele D'Annunzio during that period was the object of long and patient study and of complicated, as well as extravagant, deductions on the part of onlookers. Numerous commentators of his life have attempted to trace the true nature of his orientation, and that of his programme. They have also tried to determine the amount of sincerity that underlay the brusque transference of his allegiance from one political party to its rival. But for anyone who knew him well, there would have been no need for these queries. That brief first period of *lue politica* must be included among the hundred-and-one practical jokes which D'Annunzio has played and of which he is a past-master; they range from the first childish pranks at the Collegio Ciccognini to the heroic mystification of Bucari.

D'Annunzio only began to take himself seriously when others began to discuss his words and his acts, to defend or to attack him passionately.

Up to that moment, in his heart, he was convinced that he was lending his name and his person to a mere experiment. He desired to convince himself that, had it been his wish, he could have done as well as and better than many others, have

delivered speeches, sat on committees, resorted to obstructionist methods, have even in time become a Minister. In a word, he wished to indulge himself by playing a new game: he wanted a novel sensation—nothing more.

It was not without reason that, when he was starting on his electioneering campaign, he wrote to a friend: "*The world must convince itself that I am capable of anything.*"

He had, however, forgotten that individualism, of which he was the champion, was not at that time admitted in politics, that no one asked a new deputy for proofs of intelligence, initiative or competence, all of them most dangerous qualities of which a dozen pedants considered themselves the sole exponents. He likewise failed to realise that the one thing expected from a deputy was his *vote*; that to the "chief of the party" and the "chief of the group" the brain of the great poet Gabriele D'Annunzio meant exactly as much, or as little, as that of some lay figure on their lists, elected at the bidding of a prefect or an electioneering agent.

Before the election he wrote to Emilio Treves: "*I am a candidate. If I can overcome the disgust which the brutality of electioneering inspires in me, I shall bring this enterprise to a happy consummation.*"

By the term "brutality of electioneering" he really indicted, though he allowed the contrary to be assumed, not the Institute of Suffrage, for which he did not give a rap, but the sum-total of these fatal contacts, chiefly the physical contacts, the mere boredom of seeing and hearing *ad nauseam* the influential elector; being compelled to expound unrealisable and complicated programmes to ignorant crowds, to take part in vulgar drinking bouts, shake viscous hands, slap promiscuous shoulders, and so on.

It was all this, in fact, that inspired D'Annunzio with horror; nothing else—so much so that no sooner had he returned from the inevitable round of the electioneering campaign than he wrote with absolute frankness: "*My nostrils are still full of a sour human stench.*"

Physical repugnance lay at the root of D'Annunzio's feelings, and in this he showed himself perfectly consistent, for he has always hated to come into close contact with vulgarity.

A few days after his election he made that first political speech which was to pass into history under the title of *Discorso della Siepe* ("The Hedge Speech"), a speech that was, and remained, a veritable panegyric of individualism. Gabriele D'Annunzio, having entered the arena of parliamentary life, took his seat on the Extreme Right to which his tastes, his habits and his ties of friendship logically inclined him.

After taking his seat like a good scholar he looked around him with considerable curiosity, tempered by a real or apparent modesty.

Who to-day can say what was being discussed at that solemn moment? History has left no record of it. Probably one of the thousand-and-one amendments with which at every session those who then represented the Italian nation frittered away their time.

At his entrance many deputies—old wolves inured to every lobby trick—turned round to gaze wide-eyed at their new colleague, the "superman," the refined æsthete, who had come to swell their ranks and perhaps to disturb their daily counsels.

While he seemed to follow with deferential interest the discourse of a colleague, many must have asked themselves what might be the contents of the notes which D'Annunzio was taking at that moment.

"Will he speak?" they probably asked themselves. "What political attitude will he assume? Will he be in favour of the Minister? To what group will he adhere?"

The one thing they could not possibly foresee was that their legitimate curiosity would have to go unsatisfied for close on forty years, until the day, that is, when, for the reader's delectation, I should recopy the brief notes which D'Annunzio jotted down so long before.

Here they are, for the edification of the few Members of that Parliament who may still be alive to-day.

"*The great Vendemini*" (the word "great" is underlined to show that the Poet was not concerned only with his colleague's stature) "*vociferates furiously. A Roman? A citizen of Bologna? I can discern a whitish tongue rolling in his mouth . . . it prevents him from speaking. Does he lisp?*"

And a little lower down:

"Ferri? *There is something cunning and wicked in his eyes. Blue? Grey?*"

These six lines constituted the sum-total of the notes taken by the deputy Gabriele D'Annunzio on the first day in which he found himself in the majestic atmosphere of the National Parliament of the year of grace 1897.

As will be seen, the two *grave* questions, as far as he was concerned on that first day, were:

(1) Whether the Hon. Vendemini spoke badly because of a natural lisp or because his whitish tongue impeded his speech?

(2) Whether the Hon. Ferri (and this detail seemed even more important) had grey or blue eyes?

Preoccupations obviously of major importance for the Adriatic electors who had sent him to represent them in Parliament!

A few sittings later he passed unexpectedly from the Extreme Right to the Extreme Left, with the famous sentence: "*I go towards Life!*"

The Socialists welcomed him to their benches with warm applause. They imagined that they had found in him an ardent neophyte, perhaps even a future "leader"; they overwhelmed him with professions of devotion and praise and invited him to take part in their secret meetings.

In retrospect to-day, it seems impossible that intelligent people (and many Socialists were included in the class) could have taken for pure gold the obvious tinsel of D'Annunzio's *volte-face* policy.

I am convinced that even a brief examination of D'Annunzio's facial expression would have immediately convinced the most inexperienced psychologist that he was very far from ever becoming a disciple or a proselyte. Only politicians, with their intelligence obscured by party interests—a state of mind in which they closely resemble lovers—could be so obtuse.

He had made up his mind much earlier on the question of Socialism, and had not hesitated to proclaim his opinion. "*Socialism in Italy is absurd. Between these people and myself there is an unsurmountable barrier. I am, and I remain, an incorrigible individualist, a ferocious individualist.*"

And later he affirmed (I leave the Socialists' feelings to be imagined): "*For a single moment it pleased me to enter the lions'*

den, driven into it by my disgust for the other political parties!"

After one complete session with the "lions," which D'Annunzio often recalled as one of the most ridiculous and diverting performances in which he ever took part, he had had enough of a deputy's life.

Parliamentary exhibitionism amused him no longer.

He had never taken it seriously, and it was not in his power to have acted differently. Parliamentary life could only provoke in him disgust or laughter.

Listen to his description of the two potential Presidents of the Council in an article on the future fate of Italy in eventual world conflicts, written when he was on the eve of presenting himself as deputy in the College of San Giovanni in Florence:

"What rôle, what destiny, will Italy have in that formidable dispute? Will her conscience awaken? Will the sleeping forces, which lie slumbering in her depths, rouse themselves to save her? Does she realise, in the hour of her shame, the vital necessity of sweeping away the foul crowd of knaves and fools who oppress her? I tremble, alas! lest she be fated to fall into the hands of some low-browed Hebrew with greedy hands to whom a stuttering soldier, not even Italian by name, will cede her, as one hands an old shoe to a huckster of the Ghetto."

And on another occasion, in 1904, referring to the Venetian lion encased in the wall of the Adriatic Montona, he did not hesitate to write:

"We are happy to record that there is always more strength and wisdom in the most crumbling of our stones than there is in the muddy brains of our statesmen."

In 1909, whilst entertaining Abruzzo students who had come to see him at Pisa, and his conversation turning on politics, he spoke of the Italian Chamber of Deputies as a *"third-rate club."*

The whole structure of Parliament, its customs, catchwords, traditional phrases, he found always irresistibly comic. One day, when they were voting, a deputy ran through the corridors looking for him, because the 'quorum' was incomplete. D'Annunzio did not move, and merely laughed in his face. Referring to the incident later, he wrote: *"The Demon of Laughter had invaded my spirit."*

If the reader is at all tempted to suppose that D'Annunzio

remembered why his vote was wanted, or for the passing of what law his presence was required, let him disillusion himself.

A Giolitti would have remembered such facts for the rest of his life. D'Annunzio had forgotten them before he had even grasped the meaning of the message. Instead, after many years he could recall with a great wealth of exact detail the face of the deputy who came in such frantic haste to look for him. "*He was a little yellow-faced man, with a beard and domestic eyes in which party passion had kindled a ferocity remarkably like fright.*"

But the ridiculous appearance of his colleagues was the one thing that seems to have struck the Poet. In fact, he retained very few memories of his life as a deputy. He said to me one day at Fiume, recalling that remote period of his career: "*Yes, even then there were a few intelligent deputies. For instance, the Hon. Gaetani, Duke of Sermoneta, who said to me in the 'Salle des Pas perdus': 'Believe me, D'Annunzio, Giolitti is like a Bologna sausage, half ass and half swine.'*"

And on another occasion:

"*I remember that, when I was a deputy, I used to sit behind the Hon. De Riseis. The sapient partitioning of his hair over his bald pate had been ruined by the heat and I did not dare warn him. It was a repugnant but at the same time diverting sight, since it gave me a chance to remain oblivious to the speeches of my colleagues.*"

D'Annunzio was defeated at the next elections, which took place in 1900. He, whom Melchior de Vogue had called with great acumen the "Deputy of Beauty," was not fated to represent the only town really fit to have him as a deputy—Florence.

* * * * *

It was only ten years later, at the beginning of the Italo-Turkish War, that D'Annunzio took up politics again or, rather, displayed an active interest in them. He then wrote those songs, so vibrant with patriotism, which were first published by the *Corriere della Sera* and were later collected in one volume entitled *Merope*.

It was at this period that there took place the conflict between D'Annunzio and the publishing house of Treves (a conflict

which I describe in detail elsewhere in this volume) as the result of the suppression of the publication, ordered by Giolitti. D'Annunzio's just ire on this occasion, though perhaps not constituting a political gesture in the strictest sense, certainly amounted to a clear and solemn affirmation of a very definite political stand.

There followed, on Italy's definite occupation of Libya, a period of political tranquillity which was broken only by the sudden outburst of the terrible European conflagration. At that moment there awoke in D'Annunzio not so much the politician as the patriot and the rabid interventionist. He rose against Giolitti and his satellites who were hostile to Italian participation and, very naturally, he ranged himself on the side of those politicians who favoured it. Sonnino and Salandra were among the number.

I have spoken previously of D'Annunzio's attitude during the delay which was so heart-breaking to him and also of the hectic days which began with his oration at Quarto in May, 1915, and ended in July of the same year with his departure for the front as a combatant.

Apart from the numerous passages in which his patriotism and his personal courage shine so brightly, there is one literary work, and only one, which is concerned with a direct political issue. This is D'Annunzio's *Confessions of the Ungrateful One*. That this superb cry of indignation, emanating from so lofty a source and from a spirit so far above suspicion as D'Annunzio's, should have been used by the Italian Government to further its own ends is entirely another matter. His intention was solely an exquisite and uniquely patriotic gesture of defiance.

* * * * *

Let us pass to Fiume, where at last D'Annunzio's *art of governing* found an outlet and an opportunity.

During the twenty-one months that he governed the city he had an entirely free hand with regard to all the measures which he considered opportune or advantageous. More, he was a despot and the absolute and uncontrolled arbiter of the destinies of the city.

In matters military he consulted his generals. The Podestà

or the former members of the National Council of Fiume were allowed to submit their ideas and assist him with their experience on administrative measures. He listened with his customary courtesy, discussed the advantage of the proposed measures, at times even, in financial questions, signed without demur the papers put before him. But in all political questions, on the other hand, decisions rested entirely in his hands and were the outcome of his personal judgment. It is not sufficient even to say that his collaborators refrained, out of timidity, from advancing opinions differing from his own, for no one ever presumed to express opinions at all. In this particular domain the *Comandante* was allowed to do as he listed. The Legionaries and the townspeople not only accepted, but applauded his every decision.

At Fiume internal politics were unknown, but there existed external ones, as the *Comandante* had to maintain contact with the nations who had disapproved of his gesture and were setting traps for him. Among these it is painful to have to include the Italian Government, which played an important rôle in this connection, first through a total lack of understanding, and later, during the last period of the occupation, by openly declaring its enmity.

It cannot be denied that the situation at Fiume was extremely intricate and precarious, subjected, as it daily was, to events bristling with danger. It would have presented a difficult problem even to the most able statesman or the most astute political negotiator.

But it is probable that a coherent policy on strictly defined lines might at least have given the adversary the impression of a co-ordinated programme which the *Comandante* had not only the intention but the means to carry out: it might probably have ameliorated the political situation at Fiume.

Unfortunately, D'Annunzio was not granted sufficient time. He was fighting against countless difficulties, and the mere ability to rise to universal conceptions and to bring them within harmonious lines was in itself a miraculous achievement at a time when his life was a fever in which work and action relentlessly alternated.

As Koschnitzky, who was at that time head of the foreign

section of the Command of Fiume, wrote with so much truth: "Temporal and special conditions were adverse to him.

"And yet another factor enters into the actions of men: will-power, that tenacious and flaming will-power which was the very essence of Napoleon, Goethe, Cavour, Bismarck.

"Too often did D'Annunzio appear vacillating, uncertain; too often did he descend to compromise, give way to scruples, retrace his own steps.

"Doubtless his Fiume concessions, by reason of the high and noble sentiments which inspired them, live on *sub specie æternitatis*. But if we turn to the end of the story we find that he who was to have set three new stars shining in man's firmament has but added three paving stones to his hell."

* * * * *

It would seem that the Magna Charta of the *Comandante's* foreign policy is contained in his proclamation of October 24th, 1919 (forty-two days, that is, after the occupation of Fiume). Koschnitzky has spoken of this as a document containing the "directive lines of the programme of the foreign policy of Fiume," but I confess that, with the best will in the world, I can only regard it as a courageous and violent invective directed against the "madness and the vileness of the world," and particularly against England.

No one need be surprised that the *Comandante* of Fiume held such opinions. Lord Curzon, at the beginning of the enterprise, had called him an "irresponsible adventurer."

Later Lloyd George intensified the insult by sending to Giolitti's Government, which had drowned in blood the resistance of that most Italian of cities, his congratulations for "having brought back to reason the one who was its shame."

This curious official demeanour of the nation which sixty years earlier had so chivalrously furthered Garibaldi's enterprise against the Bourbons, was not such as to call forth in him feelings of sympathy or gratitude.

He calls England "*the voracious Empire which has laid hands on Persia, Mesopotamia, new Arabia and a large part of Africa; the covetous Empire which conceals its possession of at least a third of China's vastness.*"

And he added:

"All the rebels of all the races will assemble under our sign. And the crusade of all poor and impoverished nations—the new crusade of all poor and free men—against the usurping and predatory nations, against the preying races and the caste of usurers who yesterday exploited the war that they might exploit the peace to-day, this noble crusade will re-establish that true justice that a frozen maniac" (this is aimed at Wilson and from a literary point of view is unsurpassable) "crucified with fourteen nails and a hammer lent by the German Chancellor of the 'Scrap of Paper.'"

D'Annunzio ended his denunciation as follows:

"Every insurrection is an attempt at expression and at creation. It does not matter that it should be drenched in blood, as long as the survivors pass on to the future with the spirit of liberty and with something new, the profound instinct of the indestructible ties which bind them to their origins and their soil.

"To attack in me, to attack in you the hope in the coming day is a senseless and vain attempt!"

Considered as an appeal to world-wide revolution, a generous and at the same time unattainable dream, this proclamation is a masterpiece.

As a document of foreign policy, I take the liberty of thinking it non-existent, and it is this, by the way, which constitutes its highest and most significant value.

There is another proclamation which may be charitably described as embodying his foreign policy. It is dated January 17th, 1920, and was, with a typical gesture, dropped by D'Annunzio over Paris from a Fiume aeroplane, which covered the distance in seven hours and twenty minutes.

The numerous copies of this proclamation were scattered over Paris at the very hour when Millerand was proclaimed President of the Republic.

The message concluded with these words:

"The sword of revolt is well sharpened . . . We salute the fourth Republic and the dawning day!"

Another of his political acts took place in May 1920—that is, at the time of the Conference of Pallanza, perhaps the most pointless of all the hundred meetings and conferences which

preceded and followed it in post-war Europe.

The object of this lakeside meeting, the inglorious predecessor of the Locarno Conference, was to reach an amiable and direct understanding between the interested parties (the Italian and the Yugoslavs) on all the Adriatic questions, including that of Fiume; quite an insignificant question, as you see.

I need hardly mention that the city of Fiume, of which for months past D'Annunzio had been in military occupation, was not invited to participate in these conversations, perhaps because in the view of those who took part in them the proceedings did not interest her.

D'Annunzio sent me to Pallanza as an observer and as the bearer of a letter to General Pietro Badoglio, whom the Government had appointed as military representative on the Italian delegation.

The letter was accompanied by the following introduction:

"Dear General,—

"I have entrusted a most secret communication for your personal attention to my secretary, Tom Antongini.

"I shall be grateful if you will be good enough to receive him and enable him to place this document in your own hands.

"Yours devotedly,

"Gabriele D'Annunzio.

"Fiume d'Italia, May 8th, 1920."

I found an extraordinary atmosphere at Pallanza.

The Hôtel Métropole was occupied by the most important functionaries of the Italian delegation, surrounded by Italian Press reporters, and all awaiting Badoglio; the Hôtel Eden was the headquarters of the entire Yugoslav delegation . . . and also of Guglielmo Emmanuel, correspondent to the *Corriere della Sera*.

This strange distribution will astonish only those who no longer remember these times.

In fact the *Corriere della Sera* was then edited by Senator Albertini. While in 1914-1915 he had shown himself the most strenuous, the most passionate, the most fervent apostle of Italian intervention, no sooner had Italy achieved victory than his paper suddenly became a fervent and passionate champion of every

kind of capitulation, especially such as had a bearing upon the Adriatic problem.

The meeting of Pallanza, fortunately for Italy, petered out in journalistic gossip at the Hôtel Métropole and in a *soirée dansante* held for stray travellers from Jugoslavia and for journalists of the *Corriere della Sera* at the Hôtel Eden.

General Badoglio failed to turn up and the conference was adjourned *sine die*.

I would like to bring to the reader's notice a humorous item by reminding him that the pivot of the Yugoslav pretensions on which the Conference of Pallanza reposed was, among others, the cession of Udine and Cividale to the Serb-Croat-Slovene Realm.

"And why not Milan?" I asked a Serbian journalist whom I met at the Café Bolongaro.

"Oh! dear," he answered, "you must not be surprised if a good deal is demanded to begin with. Afterwards you will see . . . one always ends by agreeing. By the way, we never thought of Milan!"

Trumbic and the Yugoslav delegates had no cause for complaint, since they had spent a week on the beautiful lake, and General Badoglio lost a most valuable autograph of Gabriele D'Annunzio, as, having been unable to consign it to its proper destination, I was naturally obliged to return the letter to the *Comandante*. Perhaps Badoglio, whose high-sounding title was Marchese del Sabotino, never even suspected its existence; if so, he was fortunate, for, as Horace says: "*Ignoti nulla cupido*."

I had taken the precaution of copying this historic letter, since, the times being as they were, it might well have been taken from me by force.

Here it is in its entirety:

"Dear General,—

"Permit me, after such a long silence, to address Italian words to your great Italian spirit.

"Some time ago, Major Giovanni Giurati had the honour of expounding to you my intentions, which were destined to second the ends which a National Government in Italy must prosecute

by every means in its power in order to solve the Adriatic problem: to offer opposition to the definite constitution of the S.C.S. and to destroy the Yugoslav monster.

"The Croat movement against the predominance of Serbia is known to you. I have studied it close at hand, have imitated it as well as I have been able, though frequently impeded in my purpose by acute physical pain.

"It would have been easy first to promote and then to lead a revolution in Croatia, if the 'sinews' of revolution had not been lacking—the actual sinews, that is, of war.

"After weakly prolonging the discussion, the Italian Government refused their help.

"You know all this; you also know what new and active elements have added new fervour to the Croat agitation.

"You are also aware of the recent confession made by that same Dr. Trumbic whom the stalwart soldier of the Sabotino will be unable to approach without repugnance.

"The Yugoslav Kingdom is to-day in greater peril than ever. Its destiny is sealed. It is not formed according to the laws of static life. It will dissolve and perish.

"And if the events which we are facing should prove favourable, dissolution may take place within the next weeks.

"For this reason I do not doubt that an agreement concluded to-day between the plenipotentiaries of the S.C.S. and the delegates of the Italian Government would be a most regrettable error.

"I will go even further and affirm without hesitation that it would be a new crime of *lèse-patrie*.

"Here are the significant facts which I submit to your judgment and which I beg you to communicate to H.E. the Minister of Foreign Affairs:

"(a) The Serbs are withdrawing their regular troops from the lines of the armistice, especially in front of Fiume and at other points of Dalmatian territory. The 35th Regiment of Infantry, drawn up in front of the *Corpus Separatum*, has already left for the interior to face the grave situation created by the strike and revolts.

"(b) The rebels of Albania occupy Prizrend, Ferisovich and the most important passage of Kakanic, which cuts the communication between Serbia and Macedonia. Thus they assure contact

between the Albanians and the Bulgars.

"(c) The fusion between the Albanian bands and the Montenegrin bands has already taken place between Ipek and Jakova.

"(d) In the Herzegovina, especially in the Nevesinje, the Montenegrin bands have been able to capture General Teresich, Minister of War, and his suite. This stroke demonstrates not only their preponderance in that region but also their agreement with the Bosnians and the Herzegovinians.

"(e) In Ragusa, crowned by Venetian walls and turrets, the Dalmatians are only awaiting the diminution of the Serbian forces, already begun, to proclaim in the ancient palace of the Rectors the Independent Republic of Ragusa.

"(f) Large bands of insurgents roam across the soil of Trifail, armed with numerous machine-guns.

"(g) In Croatia, along the Drava, sporadic clashes of armed troops cannot be repressed.

"(h) The Montenegrin nation is resolved to multiply its efforts and to conduct a holy war usque ad metam against the odious oppressor, provided they can be supplied with arms and munitions, which are now lacking.

"Here, sir, is an exact enumeration of the signs which point to the agony and disruption of our adversary who must perish in any case, from historical and ethnical causes, even if he should temporarily succeed in breaking the grip which is throttling him.

"In warning my Chief, I comply with my duty as an Italian.

"Nor do I refrain from declaring that, as a combatant and as defender of the City of Fiume, I second with all my strength the hostile movement against the Serbs and that I am determined to persevere in this effort.

"Sir, I have the fullest confidence that in these ambiguous lake-side colloquies you will oppose the irreparable error with your usual vigour.

"Yours ever devotedly,

"Gabriele D'Annunzio.

"Fiume d'Italia, 8th May, 1920."

* * * * *

Another gesture which bore the stamp of the purest Cambronne tradition was carried out about the same time by another

Fiume aviator, the heroic Keller, as a mark of contempt and as a joke at the expense of the Italian Parliament.

Although it was not executed by the orders of D'Annunzio, it was at least a sincere, though questionable, expression of the attitude of the City of Fiume and its *Comandante* towards the faint-hearted and unintelligent Government which then ruled Italy.

Leaving Fiume, the aviator flew over the Parliament House in Rome, and in obvious and discreet allusion to Parliament and its honourable members, dropped on it an enamelled chamber filled with carrots.

It would be also opportune to mention the "Tablets of the Regency of Carnaro," which represent a regular constitutional code, and which were drawn up by the *Comandante* for use in the new State, and promulgated on the 12th September, 1920, the anniversary of his entrance into Fiume.

A study and analysis of this original statute, apart from the fact that it is outside my competence, would be also outside the scope of this volume.

Besides, it seems to me to belong to the category of those Utopian dreams which at various epochs haunted great intellects, like Tomaso Campanella, Thomas More and Saint-Simon, rather than to be applicable to actual conditions.

The only difference, it seems to me, between the Statute of Fiume and the beautiful dreams that are tinged with humanitarian and socialistic aspects, is the fact that the Statute owed its inception to a great artist, and thus constitutes an incomparable literary document.

* * * * *

Let us pass finally to the political relations between Gabriele D'Annunzio and Fascism.

To-day, when the cohesion, the comprehension, and above all the fruitful intellectual friendship between D'Annunzio and Mussolini have become matters of general knowledge, it may not be devoid of interest to seek the source of the rumour spread about in the early days, and circulated particularly by anti-Fascists abroad, of dissensions or, at least, of mutual misunderstandings between these two personages.

This objective examination will be the easier for me, inasmuch as I remained continuously in direct and daily contact with D'Annunzio from his return from Fiume until November 1922, and during the troublous month of October, which was to end in the March on Rome, I was his confidant in all his intercourse and all his discussions with Benito Mussolini.

To begin with, it is necessary to give a brief résumé of the intercourse between D'Annunzio and the *Duce* from the dawn of Fascism, not forgetting that, as the March on Rome is identified with Mussolini, so the March on Ronchi is identified, in the public mind, with D'Annunzio. Consequently it would be more than illogical to distinguish even for a moment between the personality of the *Duce* and his party, or to infer that the Poet, whilst agreeing *toto corde* with Mussolini, could maintain at the same time a tepid attitude towards the Fascist movement of which Mussolini was the head.

What were D'Annunzio's and Mussolini's relations on the eve of the occupation of Fiume?

Our purpose will be better served by the following document than by any other investigation into the conditions or mentalities of that epoch.

It is the letter which D'Annunzio sent to the Chief of the Fascist movement on the day before the March on Ronchi—that is, on September 11th, 1919. Here it is:

"My dear Comrade,—

"*Alea jacta est!*

"*I am leaving now. To-morrow I shall take Fiume by force of arms.*

"*May the God of Italy come to our assistance. I have just risen from a bed of fever. But it is impossible to delay any longer. Once more the spirit will dominate the miserable flesh.*

"*Gabriele D'Annunzio.*

"*September 11th, 1919.*"

This letter (which is unique because no other communications were sent by D'Annunzio on the eve of his departure for Fiume) is so clear and explicit and allows only of such obvious interpretation, that all comment appears superfluous.

Let us now take a leap forward. D'Annunzio has now been in Fiume for over a year. It is October, 1920.

The *Comandante* holds the town in the hollow of his hand. He is in command of the legionaries, whom he has dominated. He is isolated from the rest of the world, which not only persists in obstinately refusing to understand the meaning of his action, but places snares of every kind in his path. Communications with Italy are every day more difficult: messengers and agents are often unfaithful.

What is D'Annunzio thinking of Mussolini and Fascism?

Has he modified his opinions of them? Has he lost faith in the "*dear companion*" of 1919, to whom, so short a time before, he wrote the letter quoted above?

It would be somewhat difficult to assert this, for in those days D'Annunzio showed in an unmistakable manner his complete adherence to the flanking campaign in support of Fiume, which Mussolini was conducting in Italy, by a new and irrefutable document, as unequivocal as the first one, a request (written entirely in his own hand) to be enrolled in the Fascio of Fiume. This document bears the date of October 5th, 1920. It needs no comment.

Had not Mussolini declared in those days that "Gabriele D'Annunzio and his Legionaries, who will not surrender, honour our race? The capital of Italy is on the Quarnaro, not on the Tiber."

* * * * *

Having returned to Italy after the conclusion of the bloody conquest of Fiume, the *Comandante* once more ceded his place—this time to the Artist.

Deprived for years of the literary habits which had been fatally interrupted by the heroic interval of the war, D'Annunzio, on the day he abandoned Fiume, discovered again a peace and a solitude that were even more propitious to meditation and intellectual effort than any he had known before. The Fascism of Thought, if I may say so, substituted itself subconsciously in him for the Fascism of Action.

But having come to Milan for a conference with his publisher, he had suddenly, and when he least expected it, come to grips with a purely revolutionary movement.

Several Fascist chiefs, former war comrades of his own, foremost among whom was the heroic combatant Attilio Teruzzi, came to him unexpectedly one night at the Hôtel Cavour, where he was staying, and he received them at once.

The appearance of this handful of blackshirt combatants with shining eyes, burning with a faith which showed in their every gesture and their every word, drenched in sweat from a long march accomplished at the head of their comrades, struck D'Annunzio.

At that precise moment I could read in his eyes that the artist had disappeared once more and that the chief of the Legionaries, the man of desperate adventures, had miraculously come to life again.

Thus, and not otherwise, can be explained his gesture from the Palazzo Marino, a gesture imposed upon him by his patriotic heart, burning once again with all his old enthusiasm as a fighter.

* * * * *

Italy was on the eve of the March on Rome.

In those days, from the 5th of October to the 28th, I was, as I have already indicated, D'Annunzio's and Mussolini's go-between.

In that Italian realm, over which three powers ruled—the ministerial one, reduced to a mere husk, the Fascist one, representing strength, and the spiritual one, impersonated by D'Annunzio—I travelled with three safe-conducts: one signed by the *Comandante*, the second signed by the *Duce*, and the third by the Prefect of Milan.

The posts occupied by the Royal Guards, the dispersed troops of D'Annunzian Legionaries, and the numerous controls of the Fascist militia, alternated with such rapidity that after I had shown by mistake the wrong safe conduct to the sentry, even the representatives of Public Safety ended by smiling at this strange individual who was apparently welcome to all parties.

Towards the latter end of the month, in which the destinies of the nation were to be broken on the wheel, my conversations with D'Annunzio became even more frequent.

But although I assured him every day that the epilogue was imminent, he did not share my feelings.

No discord whatever separated him from Mussolini, but in his heart of hearts he was convinced that nothing decisive was to happen and that it was necessary to leave everything to time.

He was still a prey to a thousand uncertainties.

Even on the day (the date was the 26th of October) when I brought him the formal invitation from Benito Mussolini to assume the command of the Legionaries, who were about to commence their march on the capital, he still wavered.

And on the very day on which Mussolini, called upon by the King of Italy to constitute the new Ministry, left for Rome, D'Annunzio was still so incredulous and vacillating, living so much outside the world and its realities, as to write to me in perfect good faith this magnificent but now obsolete letter:

"One's country is the work of assiduous creation. This work must consist in creating an even greater country and acting as one's own legislator.

"This is a simple truth that must be placed again on the deserted altars.

"In me manet et ego in ea.

"The future is before us, not like a dubious labyrinth but like a firm Roman road. Patet aditus.

"For a young nation the Triumphal Arch may sometimes be compared to a rainbow.

"Serenitatem adfert.

"And I wish all Italy to understand my Latin, which is that of the Consuls and that of the Humanists.

"Be you also among the 'doers of the word.'

"I embrace you, Ave!

"Gabriele D'Annunzio.

"29th October, 1922."

* * * * *

With the advent of Fascism, Gabriele D'Annunzio's political activity came to an end.

The magnificent craftsman, the incomparable creator of masterpieces, came back to ordinary life.

The proclaimer of the war, the heir of the heavens, of the sea, of the slopes of the Carso and of the miraculous gesture of Fiume entered the realm of Legend.

CHAPTER XX

D'ANNUNZIO'S FRIENDS

"Forse che si, forse che no"—Boyhood friends—Private enemies—The Poet and Marcel Proust—Fourteen exceptions to the rule—Mellow nights at Francavilla—D'Annunzio congratulates the Senate—The musical illness—Cesare Fontana, unknown dandy—The guardian of my smile—My friends' friends are my friends—Twenty years after—High Priest of Tout-Paris—Romaine Brooks—Friendly husbands—D'Annunzio and Julius Cæsar.

Few people have made a more extensive use of the word "friendship" than has D'Annunzio. Of the most casual acquaintance he will say: "*He is a great friend of mine!*"

Just as he has always belittled love in jest and in earnest, going even to the point of questioning its very existence, so he has never ceased to glorify friendship. Michelangelo wrote to his brother, Buonarrotto: "I have no friends of any sort, nor do I want any." The Poet, shocked by this, wrote: "*I cannot think without horror of the day when I may lose my faith in friendship and thus be forced to relinquish to the need of confiding in a friend. Fate willed it that I should experience the sweetness of friendship long before I experienced that of love.*"

Have you read: *Forse che si, forse che no?* When you have turned the last page of this book—questionable from the points of view of psychological exactitude and "bourgeois" morals, but nevertheless a consummate work of art embodying all the perversions and intricacies of love—I beg you to glance at the dedication: "*To Francesco Coselschi, this book de amicitia is dedicated.*"

We see, then, that the Poet looked upon this work as a treatise of friendship. Was he sincere or did he conceive the idea of putting this interpretation on it when he had finished it? I have never been able to determine. I do know, however, that Léon Blum wrote: "*Forse che si, forse che no* is only a magnificent hymn to friendship." D'Annunzio himself discovered this

criticism, and he remarked to me: "*He is the only one who has understood the sense of my work.*"

Now that I have stressed the importance which D'Annunzio has attached to friendship all his life, I am going to make a statement which will astonish my readers, with the possible exception of a few who may have known him intimately enough to form a detached opinion of this extraordinary man: *Gabriele D'Annunzio has never been anyone's friend.*

If we mean by "friend" the spiritual brother who can confess everything to us, from whom we conceal nothing, of whom we can ask anything because we are ready to give him everything; if we mean one whose disapproval is sufficient to cause us to doubt our own judgment; if we mean by "friendship" the entire and divine sacrifice of personal interests without limit and regardless of difficulties, through all the adversities and vicissitudes of life; if we mean by a "friend" one whom we could never deceive without a feeling of intense shame: then I reiterate, *Gabriel D'Annunzio has never been anyone's friend.*

"Where are the friends of his youth?" Léon Koschnitzky asks in his splendid book on Fiume. "How is it that we never see them now, in the hour of danger? I am continually asking myself this question. There are thousands of young men who would die unhesitatingly for the *Comandante*. But has he any friends? He has his faithful followers—that is true. Their devotion, stronger than any other proof, has endured twenty, thirty years. Take, for instance, Annibale Tenneroni and Tom Antongini. But has he a friend? Where are the companions of dark hours, the confessors of secret thoughts, the guardians of joy and of pleasure, those who can advise kindly, who do not rally round him out of admiration, calculation, curiosity or even out of love, but out of simple affection, those who follow the genius because they are attached to him by the chain of years, by the garland of common reminiscences?—those whom one does not call but who are present, whom one does not invoke but who come running, those whom one does not implore but who console—where are they?"

Toward the end of his book the author shows that his opinion has somewhat changed. But this is explained by the fact that he has, in the meantime, seen D'Annunzio and has come under

the spell of that eternal seducer of men and women. His first impression was the correct one.

D'Annunzio has often believed himself to be the true friend of the sympathetic companion of a day, a week, a month or a year. Or, if he has not really believed so—which is equally possible—he has, at least, manifested the same enthusiasm and positiveness with which many a sane but romantic man declares that the woman he has most recently discovered is the one and only love of his entire life. I am sure that he fails to realise that, for him, friendship may be as transient as a Sunday at the seashore.

In the days of Fiume, whom did he consider as his friends?—those who lived as he lived, shared his daily tribulations, and his worries and his joys, dreamed of the same glories and cherished the same ideal of patriotism. In that period of feverish activity, his brothers in art, his companions in pleasure, the æsthètes, the intellectuals became unimportant in his eyes—I may even say that he considered them grotesque—simply because they had no place in the picture which interested him at the moment.

It was not many months, however, before the Fiume episode came to a tragic finish. The soldier departed and the Poet recommenced his life as an artist and man of letters. Immediately the forgotten intellectuals became his friends and guests. The comrades of Fiume were bundled up and relegated to a dusty corner of the attic. After a dinner which had been attended by some of his soldier friends, he did not hesitate to say to me: *"Did you notice how insignificant heroes are when they are not fighting?"* And he concluded: *"Now I understand Garibaldi who, when he introduced a comrade-in-arms to someone, said: 'Allow me to present to you this heroic imbecile.'"*

No! It is not in D'Annunzio's power to be a true friend.

Of course, if we mean by "friend" that perfect being (I was about to say inexistent) who never refuses to lend us money when we need it, we can affirm without hesitation that the Poet is the best friend in all this world. He said to me one day in this connection—and not without malice: *"Yesterday I lent X a thousand lire. Alas! I've made myself another enemy. He will never forgive me."*

The prophecy came true. The beneficiary of the loan, an Italian writer, as well known as he is lugubrious, dedicated pages of venom and impotent rage to D'Annunzio.

But friendship must consist of something more than generosity. It should represent an almost complete fusion. It presupposes a certain equality—something which, for so exceptional a being as D'Annunzio, is an impossibility. Friendship also demands reciprocal disinterestedness. The Poet is quite capable of this disinterestedness because, not only does he need no one but he can, when he so desires, think and act contrary to the approval of the whole world. This is not the case of others who, in general, cannot be oblivious to the advantages, indirect as they may be, which the friendship of this great man can procure for them in one circumstance or another.

"The friendship of a great man is a gift from the gods," wrote Voltaire, and all those who approach the Poet are convinced of the truth of this remark, whether they confess it or not.

D'Annunzio is likewise aware of this fact. He frequently employs the word "friend" to begin a letter, even when he is addressing a mere acquaintance, because he accurately weighs the value of the expression in the mind of the recipient. Everyone has a wife, a sister, a mistress, a friend or an employer who will be impressed knowing that one is intimate with D'Annunzio. He knows, furthermore, that it is extremely difficult for the person whom he has called "friend" to refuse a service. And I add, with no intent to belittle the Poet, but rather to applaud his excellent judgment of human nature, that when the required service is of some importance he does not hesitate to pen a letter which literally casts formality to the winds, so close does it seem to bring him to the addressee.

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There are many other reasons why D'Annunzio cannot be a veritable friend to others.

Friendship frequently prevents a man from leading his own life. It necessitates renunciations, small sacrifices, efforts and it never fails to occasion waste of time. But D'Annunzio's life goes, and always has gone, at the speed of a meteor. His destiny is leagued and confounded with events which are alien to the

normal conditions in which ordinary mortals eke out their existences. He cannot afford to waste time. It is one luxury which he does not permit himself to indulge.

Would D'Annunzio have created masterpieces for posterity had he interrupted his inspirations to reply to the letters of the friends who have sought his financial assistance or his advice about a banal love affair? Would D'Annunzio be the hero of Fiume and one of Italy's foremost sons had he remained at the bedside of a sick friend when it was time to act?

It seems as if Marcel Proust must have been thinking of him when he wrote: "No matter what moral motive inspires him, the artist who gives up a single hour of his work for an hour of conversation with a friend knows that he is sacrificing a reality for something which does not exist." Or: "The human altruism which is not egotistical is sterile: it is that of the writer who interrupts his work to receive an unhappy friend."

D'Annunzio, whose natural kindness would cause him sometimes to set aside so cruel a theory and who, on the other hand, refuses to have his work interrupted under any pretext, has long ago found a method which permits him to work without being disturbed and without experiencing remorse. When he sets to work he closes the doors and forbids his servants to bring him any communication, oral or written, until he signifies that he is once more at the disposal of the outside world.

Completely distinct from these considerations, there is another reason why D'Annunzio is not, and never has been, a real friend; apart from very rare exceptions, he has always, coldly and systematically, looked down upon his fellow-men. Of course, his exquisite amiability makes it possible for everyone to believe himself the fortunate exception.

How many times have I seen D'Annunzio destroy, with a smile of irony and a biting phrase, the reputation for intelligence and the qualities of those whom he has spoken of as his "great friends"! How many times have I seen him toss the fifth, the tenth, the twentieth letter from one of these "great friends" unopened into the waste-basket, although he has recognised the writing at a glance! How many times, when he has been changing his cravat or hanging a picture, has he calmly refused to receive a "great friend" who has come miles to see him, and who

eventually goes away discouraged and sick at heart, because he cannot understand the reason for this barrage!

I do not want my readers to conclude that D'Annunzio is incapable of affection or that his egoism is such as to prevent him from sacrificing anything but money for another. Affection, however, is not necessarily friendship. In the course of his long life it must be recognised that he has given indisputable proofs of preference and attachment for certain companions of his youth whose intelligence he appreciates and whose devotion he respects, as well as for certain comrades-in-arms whose heroism he admires.

But these are few in number. Here are fourteen fortunate exceptions to a cruel rule:

The painter Francesco Paolo Michetti, Annibale Tenneroni, the sculptor Clemente Origo, Luigi Lodi, the musician Paolo Tosti, Cesare Fontana, Cesare de Titta, Edoardo Scarfoglio, the poets Adolfo de Bosis and Pascarella, Tom Antongini and the war heroes Randaccio, Palli and Guido Keller.

I believe that I have forgotten no one. If I have it is because I prefer to say too little than too much.

Randaccio and Palli owe to their glorious deaths three-quarters of the sentiment of friendship which D'Annunzio has for them. He has pronounced and written words about these heroes which relieve me of the necessity of giving proofs of his affection.

Annibale Tenneroni dedicated his life to considering D'Annunzio not merely as a superman but as a demi-god. He loved those who admired his idol and hated those who spoke ill of him. His devotion was a cult, and permitted neither of argument nor of reason. One day when he chanced to see a bill for six hats which the Poet had ordered, received and failed to pay for, he crumbled the paper in a ball, looked across the table at me and said of the poor shopkeeper: "It is incomprehensible to me how such scoundrels are allowed to live in this world!" And D'Annunzio knew that in the brave old Tenneroni he had a faithful watch-dog. He gave him in return all the affection of which he was capable. He always spoke of him as "*My candid brother.*"

D'Annunzio's friendship for the great painter Francesco Paolo Michetti is perhaps one of the most profound and noble

of his life. It was the artist's picture *Figlia di Jorio* which inspired the Poet to write the tragedy of the same name, and the two masterpieces were blended into one in the eyes of an impartially admiring public. Michetti not only entertained D'Annunzio in his strange house with windows of various sizes and shapes at Francavilla, and of which the Poet wrote: "*among the silver olive trees which undulated peacefully between the azure of the sky and the blue of the sea—*" but he placed at his disposal a studio in the ancient cloister of Santa Maria Maggiore, not far from Francavilla. It was there that D'Annunzio wrote *Il Piacere*.

"O, sweet nights of Francavilla," sings the Poet in after-years, "*where has now dispersed that fine company of friends? Paolo Tosti is in England in the midst of fog and smoke and sends us sometimes a melancholy romance where we often find a distant memory of the songs of our country. The great Michetti lives in solitude in his house of tufa and wood, sonorous as an instrument, invaded by prolific pigeons, beaten by the waves.*"

D'Annunzio's affection for Michetti is consecrated by the verses dedicated to him in *La Chimera*, in which he evokes their common past as artists and dreams of a return to his native land:

"O Francesco——

"Your soul issues resplendent, winged, from our charming communion——

"You, the Master of the brush, I, the Master of rhyme, we will forge things of marvellous beauty——

"Towards the fall of night there will unite, for a contrast, in the garden filled with flowers and rose-bushes, women, actors, musicians, princes, as in a 'Decameron.'

"And at last it will be pleasant to compose together, in the beautiful night, as we stroll between the rose-bushes——"

But the two artists were not to meet again in this world. One of the delightful characteristics of their long friendship was the presence of gaiety at all times. When, in 1909, Michetti was named a Senator, the Poet sent him this telegram: "*I send my congratulations to the Senate and I embrace you.*" And, in 1929, he wired me to Berlin, where I was seriously ill: "*I hope you are on the road to recovery and I beg you to write. I am sadder*

than ever because of the loss of my great friend. I embrace you.—Gabriele."

D'Annunzio's friendship with the musician Paolo Tosti dates back to the origin of that with Michetti and is joined to it because they met in the same places at the same periods. Just as at Francavilla, on the Adriatic, Michetti received painters, sculptors, musicians and poets. In the course of 1883 (a year which D'Annunzio calls unforgettable) Tosti gathered in his apartment in Rome the most illustrious musicians and the most exquisite connoisseurs of art. "*A mysterious apartment,*" says the Poet, "*full of dark corridors and hiding-places where, often, when one of us arrives brusquely, badly stifled feminine laughter can be heard.*"

"When he was in the mood, Paolo Tosti gave us music for hours and hours without tiring, forgetting everything but his piano, improvising sometimes. We listened in silence, closing our eyes sometimes the better to pursue our dreams—it had a great soothing effect on all our senses. After two months of this satiety, our sensations were so refined that all contacts with the outside world afflicted and troubled us. We were very nearly sick with music."

But lest my readers lose track of the real D'Annunzio, I feel it indispensable to add that this infirmity of musical origin did not prevent the Poet from admiring women. This speaks for itself: "*Marie Tascher, that splendid creature with the voice of a nightingale, was also present at our fêtes. Agile, fragile and flexible, she swayed slightly to the rhythm as she sang and thus reminded me, of a great flower.*"

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Clemente Origo, marquis and sculptor, no longer of this world, was an independent and talented artist and, for twenty years, one of the Poet's gayest companions. They understood each other. A large part of *Laudi* was written in Origo's house, known as "Motrone." They were united by a great fraternity of artistic tastes, and D'Annunzio confided to Origo nearly everything of his intimate life: his feminine conquests, his countless adventures. Origo, usually aloof from love affairs, had the misfortune to become passionately enamoured of a woman who remained mysterious and reticent towards him. He followed

her to Paris, where the Poet chanced to be, told him of his misery and begged him to intervene on his behalf. D'Annunzio accepted the diplomatic mission and proceeded to seduce the lady, who promptly became his mistress. There is nothing astonishing about this, for the Poet has ever been fond of the expression, "*My friends' friends are my friends.*" What is unusual is that Origo, learning of his misfortune, beamed and remarked: "Gabriele has saved me! I was about to make myself ridiculous and, at my age, that would be unpardonable!"

Cesare de Titta, the oldest friend of all, was the friend of childhood and the ideal custodian of the Poet's literary penates in the Abruzzi. D'Annunzio spoke of him in affectionate terms, although I doubt if they met more than once in fifty years. So remote was Titta from him and from his turbulent existence that D'Annunzio, even when Titta was alive, thought of him rather as a fond memory than as a living being.

Cesare Fontana came into the Poet's life in 1880, when the latter was seventeen. To him he wrote: "*If ever thy soul, weary of this eternal comedy known as the world, should need a soul to comfort it and to understand its generous impulses, that soul shall be mine—Is it not true that we will never forget each other, that we will be brothers henceforth, that we will share the joys and sorrows and the dreams and the hopes on which will smile the gentle phantoms of our youth and the indescribable ardours of our hearts—Is it not true, Cesare?*" Cesare Fontana, a myth or a mystery for many, was my great-uncle. He was a great lover of music, painting and solitude. He lived alone in a magnificent house in Milan until, one fine day, he disappeared, leaving behind him debts and the reputation of a dandy of another age. When D'Annunzio created Andrea Sperelli in *Il Piacere* he was thinking of Fontana.

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I would consider myself the most ungrateful individual under the sun were I to abstain from mentioning the affection which the Poet has always reserved for me and which, I rejoice to say, is as profound and sincere to-day as it has been for more than thirty years. And I would be shirking my duty as a biographer, because his affection for me—which I have ever returned with fervour and fidelity—is a striking exception in a man of his temperament.

He told me one day not so long ago: "*You are the guardian of my smile.*" We have smiled often and at many things! If modesty forbids me to publish the following letter written to an important member of the Italian Government, I disobey because nowhere can I find another example of similar enthusiasm and insistence for a friend:

"Dear Comrade:

"I have already had occasion to ask your indulgence—forbidden by the regulations—on behalf of two gymnasts who resented their exclusion from the Grand Match. They were both superb athletes and rightly considered themselves likely winners of the contest. You refused my request. I only remind you of this unfortunate incident to present you with an opportunity to make amends. After a long and dangerous illness in Berlin, Tom Antongini has come to recuperate his strength and his good humour in the rose garden of the Vittoriale. I believe that you are aware of the culture, the activity and the constancy of our friend. The Prime Minister also knows and appreciates him. I consider that Tom Antongini possesses all the qualities necessary to make him extremely valuable both in journalism and politics. Having first served valiantly as a Legionary, he has since most efficiently represented the Regency of Carnaro in Paris. He knows the men and the institution of Paris backwards and forwards. During my years of exile he was my constant auxiliary, and proved himself to be an observer of great penetration and elegance. The time has come to recompense him as befits his value and his sincere desire to serve. I feel sure that you will receive in a spirit of justice this request on behalf of another athlete who disdains to display his biceps. I know that you are, for him, a young friend as affectionate as I, who am an old friend. I thank you. I embrace you.—Gabriele D'Annunzio, The Vittoriale, May the 20th, 1929."

Dame Fortune, who is, for some of us, the sole arbiter of Destiny, did not permit me to obtain the recompense which D'Annunzio requested with such fraternal ardour; perhaps the goddess, with a band across her eyes, esteemed me sufficiently rewarded by the words of the Poet, and I have not the heart to say that she was wrong.

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There exist, and have existed, a number of what I may call minor friends. D'Annunzio's attachment to them has taken various and erratic forms, dependent on where he happened to be living as well as on other equally vague circumstances.

Mario Pelosini, a lawyer of repute and a polished speaker, gifted with the artist's soul, has not only known the Poet for many years but is, in a sense, his disciple. One day, in Arcachon, D'Annunzio received from Pelosini a noble and unexpected profession of faith. I never saw the letter, but I have read *Il Messaggio*, to be found at the beginning of *Contemplazione della Morte*: "From afar I have received from you only the sober proofs of an ever-increasing love and of an ever more tenacious faith; so much so that, thinking of the sublime meadow which lies between the Campo and the Baptistry at Pisa and of the sad shore between the Serchio and the Arno, I can, without discord, think of you as the preferred of the very rare beings who know how to love me as I want to be loved." Now, who would imagine that, after such a dedication, the two men would not have maintained a frequent and lengthy correspondence? The fact is that, from that day in 1912 until November, 1931, D'Annunzio never so much as mentioned the name of Mario Pelosini; then only did he recall the existence of this devoted, sincere and intelligent friend. He sent for him and Pelosini came. Does this not remind you of Alexandre Dumas' *Twenty Years After*? D'Annunzio is more like Mazarin than Mazarin himself.

In France, Robert de Montesquiou was not only D'Annunzio's friend but a sort of High Priest who conferred on him the precious seal of social recognition. A polished and ultra-decadent poet, this descendant of noble lineage was, for nearly fifty years, one of the most-feared and most venomous tongues in Paris, and when he determined to present the Italian Poet in the most *recherché* salons of *Tout-Paris*, all the doors of the *faubourg* were opened to him as if by enchantment. De Montesquiou, although excessively conceited, bowed before the literary genius of D'Annunzio as before an altar. In writing to him, he always began: "My sublime friend." D'Annunzio frequently regrets his death.

To Marcel Boulanger, another Frenchman, D'Annunzio has devoted pages in his *Leda senza Cigno*, thus celebrating their

long companionship and recognising Boulanger's devotion and his great love for Italy. When the Poet was ill in Venice he telegraphed to his friend: "*I hope to recover so that I can again see Chantilly and the orchard of friendship.*"

Also in France D'Annunzio did something almost unheard of for him: he made a woman friend in the person of Romaine Brooks, the American artist. I think I may call her unique in that, alone of all her sex, she managed to gain and hold the Poet's interest from an exclusively artistic and intellectual point of view. He said to me: "*Physically, Romaine Brooks resembles Eleonora Duse. She is a strange woman who lives in a marvellous 'hôtel particulier' on the Avenue du Trocadéro. It is completely black and grey, for these are the only tones she permits in her art, in the decoration of her home and in her dress. Although she is an American, she is both intelligent and a true artist.*" He spent long hours with the "*Barbarian*," as he loved to call her, and he was never bored in her company. During the war she lived in Venice, where they continued their long conversations and where she did a portrait of the Poet in black and grey. This very personal canvas now hangs in the Musée du Luxembourg.

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Mention to D'Annunzio a village in Tibet, a town in Australia, a colony in Africa, and he will at once say to you: "*Of course, I have a great friend there.*" These out-of-the-way people may be conveniently called his regional friends, and they enter into his scheme of things when he desires to know the effect of the marital condition on the whiteness of elephants' tusks or when he chances to visit the village, town or colony where the friend resides. On their own ground these happy mortals are flattered and embraced and made to believe that they are indispensable, but woe be unto them if they stray from the native heath with a thought of visiting D'Annunzio at the Vittoriale, for there they will be favoured with a distant smile if they are received at all.

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At last, having, I believe, dealt with all the categories of friends likely to be found on the list of the average human

being, I come to a very special but by no means rare type of friend familiar to D'Annunzio. I speak of the husbands who have been deceived by the Poet or, rather, of the husbands whose wives have deceived them with him. For obvious reasons, I do not elaborate a list of names but content myself with assuring my readers that, were I to do so, it would not only be as illustrious as, but far longer than, that which I have submitted of his real friends.

It goes without saying that some of these husbands are well aware of what happened; but the majority do not suspect the glorious adventure of which they have been the victims. So adept is D'Annunzio at convincing these unfortunate gentlemen of the absolute purity of his friendship with their charming wives that no one of them, even were he to peruse these lines, would permit the vaguest suspicion to enter his head. And are there not letters written by D'Annunzio to their chaste wives which are irrefutable proofs of the platonic qualities of his affection? As for those husbands who are not in ignorance of their misfortune, are they not in a position similar to that of those husbands whose wives found the favour of Louis XIV or Manuel or Napoleon or Stalin? What can they do—commit suicide or murder—fight a duel with D'Annunzio? No, they can only accept the situation with smiling stoicism.

Only one husband, who had the temperament of the Marquis de Pompadour, refused to sacrifice his conjugal happiness on the altar of friendship. He caused the Poet to be condemned on the charge of adultery. But I should state that the poet-felon was then a rising star at best and nothing but an impudent puppy in the eyes of the husband. Forty-five years have passed and the case is ancient history.

D'Annunzio counts so many deceived husbands among his friends that the Legionaries of Fiume would have been quite justified in imitating those of Julius Cæsar who, carrying their leader on their shields into the conquered cities, sang:

"SERVATE UXORES, MOECUM CALVUM ADDUCIMUS." ("Lock up your women, the bald goat is with us.")

CHAPTER XXI

FAMILY RELATIONS

The model child—The dream of glory—The father—Two living turquoises—The abduction of a Princess—A scrupulous Prefect—Three sons in three years—D'Annunzio, father of Bellerophon—The sordid sinner—The sonnet-drawer—Legal adultery—The gentle Donna Maria—D'Annunzio and Mahomet—The Poet's sons—The American son—The future Prince of Monte Nevoso—The parricide—La Sirenetta, Gabriele D'Annunzio's ideal secretary—A book under lock and key—Luisa D'Annunzio, flower of mothers.

IF we take the man-in-the-street's point of view of the sacred institution of the family, and if we insist on bringing the "D'Annunzio case" under the self-same laws by which the lives of ordinary mortals are judged, we shall have to admit that our hero has made but a poor showing as son, father and husband.

But if, before passing judgment, we look back over the private lives of Horace and Byron, Augustus and Napoleon, Rafael and Michelangelo, St. Francis, Dante, Goethe and Garibaldi—over the lives, in short, of any of the famous conquerors, artists, tyrants or warriors who have graced humanity, we shall be forced to admit that Gabriele D'Annunzio was ever a *model son*. As a father and a husband he may be summed up as a kind but selfish man, who would have done better to remain a bachelor to the end of his days. On the whole, his conception of family life is neither better nor worse than that of thousands who have less excuse, since they have no claim to the indulgence and the privileges which are his.

Unlike many of Fate's chosen ones, who from early childhood display the disturbing qualities of turbulence, intolerance, and lack of respect towards their elders and betters, D'Annunzio was an exemplary child, always deferential to his parents and in every way a mode of propriety. The fact can readily be proved.

In 1875, after spending two and a half years at the Collegio Ciccognini di Prato, to which his parents had sent him at the age of twelve, he wrote to them:

"By now you will have read my five letters, written in different languages, and you will have blessed me.

"Be sure, Father, that this is the only true sweetness, the only true comfort that I expect from all my work. Praise pleases me because I know that you will rejoice in it. Glory pleases me because I know that you will exult in the knowledge that my name is famous. Life pleases me because I know that mine must serve as a consolation and a support to yours . . .

"Yesterday, our Director heard that I had written these letters and sent you my work; he called me and told me that I was a good son, that I would succeed, that I was courageous, that you were not spending your money in vain upon me, that I was always affectionate, always courageous . . .

"Oh! yesterday, I do not hesitate to tell you, was the loveliest day of my whole life . . .

"My eyes began to shine, I felt my heart swelling deep within me. I felt that I was panting for breath, I felt myself suffocating and opened my arms wide, as though to call out to you, and hot tears ran down my cheeks.

"They were tears of joy.

"Oh! for complete happiness one thing only was lacking—your kiss!

"How good for the soul are these moments after the tempest! How light I feel, how peaceful, how happy! I see my future bathed in glory; and I could wish, were it possible, that the motherland, my fellow-countrymen, humanity itself, might merge into a single person, so that I might take them all to my arms, saying: I love you!

"Father mine, Mother mine! my boundless thanks are yours for having brought me into this world. I thank you from the bottom of my heart that you have given me a heart that is kind. I adore you, and if ever my country is to be proud of me, I would wish you, not I, to reap the praise . . .

"Addio! From the depths of my soul I salute you, O my parents! O my brothers! O my friends! O my master! O all of you who feel some affection for me! From the depths of my soul I salute you, O Pescara! my native town, O hills! O my house! which holdest such a rich treasure of virtues and affections."

And another time, from Rome, writing to his father:

"My dear Daddy,

"I wrote to you at length yesterday evening to wish you, from all my heart, as your son, the most splendid and long-lived happiness, the greatest I have ever dreamed for you.

"To-morrow will be a day of introspection and meditation for me. Do you remember when I was a child and used to come to you in the early mornings, radiant with joy and bringing you armfuls of flowers?

"At that time I was a budding flower myself, unfolding under the warm rays of family affection, with no cloud to mar my happiness and no want to disturb the peace of my soul.

"To-day, no longer a flower but almost a man, with strong nerves and ardent passions, with desperately eager ideals; no longer a flower but a young and spreading oak boldly defying the rough winds of Life.

"Shall I reach the highest pinnacle of art and glory? Or shall I fall fighting by the roadside?

"I desire an immense victory for myself. I desire that I may offer to your lips my radiant forehead for a sublime kiss.

"And in desiring this for myself, at the same time I desire it for you, O my kindest, noblest, O my dearest friend! for I know that I am offering you a divine gift.

"A hundred thousand kisses from all my heart.

"Yours for ever, Gabriele."

Letters written in this strain would cause a smile, so exaggerated and conventional do they seem at first sight, did we not know that they were written by one destined to become the greatest intellectual of a great nation.

They stop at nothing: "the future bathed in glory, patriotism, family love, the calm after the storm, the tears of joy, the homage to the teacher, to the hills, to the house, to the native city . . ."

But when we remember that they were written by Gabriele D'Annunzio, our outlook changes: we are forced to admit that they bear a quietly prophetic character.

What ten-year-old boy would dream of writing that he sees "*my future bathed in glory*," that he foresees that "*the country will have reason to be proud of me*," if these words were not inspired by a prophetic vision maturing in his subconscious mind, of events stronger than himself?

If we examine D'Annunzio's youthful letters from this angle, their effusive passages lose their insipid and conventional character and are transmuted into something deeper and more fundamental, which gives further proof of the author's moral qualities.

These letters, of course, are not the only proofs of the love and devotion felt by D'Annunzio for his parents; there are countless other indications of his feeling for them.

All, great and small alike, go to prove the depth of the tenderness, the devotion, the gratitude which bound the Poet to his father and mother, and this partly because he felt himself enveloped and protected by their solicitude and, above all, "set apart" by their appreciation. It is worthy of note that D'Annunzio's father (I shall speak of his admirable mother later and at greater length)—a rare exception to the prevailing rule that fathers, by the will of God, and from a sense of *professional obligation*, should systematically oppose their children's ambitions—had no sooner read his son's first poem than he had it printed, and distributed it himself to all his friends and acquaintances. Let it clearly be understood that this was no case of a weak or deluded father. Don Francesco Paolo D'Annunzio, in his time a pugnacious mayor of Pescara, was energy and exuberance personified.

His son, who observed and studied him not only with loving eyes but in that characteristically analytical spirit which never prevented him from expressing his thoughts crudely, speaks of him in the following terms:

"I see my father, corpulent and full-blooded, a little out of breath, with his rather fiery eyes lit, at times, with a strange ardour, like smouldering phosphorus. I see the huge neck bulging over the collar, the small tie-pin, a dog's head with ruby eyes, and the jasper seal which hangs from his watch-chain. I cannot say how I knew it, but even then I knew that my fate was the stronger of the two and that it was my part to exact from my near and dear ones a blind devotion and the entire gift of themselves. My father realised this just as well as I. He never praised or encouraged me, nor did he show me the road to follow or incite me to effort in any particular direction; but he had such faith in me, from my most tender years, that up to the very day of his death I felt the flame of my own spirit

alive in him. Of a tyrannical disposition towards all others, he early surrendered his authority over me, content with supervising my tendencies and watching over my dreams. On more than one occasion I have known him to bridle his temper to avoid distressing me. More than once I found myself listening to the blood pounding in his massive body.

"He watched me with grave and unfailing attention, endeavouring to understand me. When my love for him seeks to recall him in his most moving attitude, I picture his expression when listening to me. He never once treated me lightly, never mocked me, even when confronted by my peculiarities, my excesses and my affectations. He always showed a quiet confidence that his own convictions would not be disappointed. And I, so different from him by nature and upbringing, felt that part of me remained rooted deep in the darkness, shut up in that massive body of his and nourished by it."

The passing years saw D'Annunzio a youthful and already famous poet, living his own life in that city of the most complete freedom—Rome.

And what sort of life was it? Did he frequent gambling-dens? Did he haunt the music-halls, of which the town was full? Did he smoke or drink? He never thought of such things.

The worst sin that could be laid to his charge at the time was that he paid assiduous court to the celebrated beauties of the capital, lauding them to the skies in passionate articles dedicated to them in the newspapers, and so killing two birds with one stone, for while the articles brought him a modest fee from the editor of the paper, they procured for him, in the shadowy recesses of his *garçonnière*, other and splendid compensation for services rendered.

And when at last he fell in love, who was the object of his passion?

"I look," wrote D'Annunzio after having seen his future wife, "at the great turquoise, engraved with gold like a talisman, which bedecks the wrist of Principessa Ginetti, and I compare it with the two living turquoises opposite me, shining under their long lashes with a golden light and casting on me a spell that no talisman is strong enough to resist."

That the lady moved in the highest circles of Society goes without saying; that her parents turned away from such a

suitors and contemptuously refused the desired consent goes equally without saying. It is the artist's common lot. The thought uppermost in the minds of the Duke and Duchess of Gallese, when the beardless youth began with exaggerated persistence to haunt their house in pursuit of their daughter, must have been: "What a match for our little Princess!"

"What a match!" Surely at that moment neither her father nor her mother could have foreseen that, some day, she would become a princess in her own right, thanks to the merit of that humble little poet of the Abruzzi.

What course did D'Annunzio pursue in the face of the obstinate refusal of his innamorata's parents? Ardent and romantic, he solved the knotty problem by simply eloping with his future wife, with the fixed purpose of making her his own before God and man.

If the ceremony was for a time delayed, this was in no way his fault, but the blame must be laid on the Prefect of Florence, who suddenly appeared before the fugitive turtle-doves who had just arrived there, with instructions to part them at once, at least temporarily, "such being the orders he had received from Rome."

The two young lovers gazed into each other's eyes. The man, taken unawares by this unexpected official intervention, was confused and upset.

But the "little princess of the shining eyes under the long lashes" at once found the right word, such as women alone are capable of finding at critical moments.

She turned to the representative of the Government, a general to boot, and answered with her most alluring smile: "I hope, General, that you will honour us with your presence at our marriage?"

And so the poet of the *Canto Novo* and the *Signora dei Sogni*—this was the name he had given her in a sonnet—were united in holy matrimony on the 23rd of July, 1883, by secular and spiritual rites, the husband being twenty years old and the bride not yet nineteen!

The love-match bore early fruit: three sons in three years!

This fact, too, speaks well for the morality of D'Annunzio, a writer whom just at this time the most competent of Italian

critics presented to the public as a pornographic poet "who revelled in his corruption and prided himself on it, and was thus a grave source of danger to the future of the country."

It might have served for proof of such contentions had D'Annunzio given a practical demonstration of birth control, instead of which he appears as a model husband, qualifying forty years in advance for one of the prizes instituted by Mussolini in 1927, to encourage the propagation of families in Italy.

Theoretically, he held a different opinion, because he wrote shortly before: *"An artist must desire for himself a fecund spirit and sterile flesh. He must renounce carnal posterity in favour of his work. The man is to be pitied who, after producing a son, says: 'This is my masterpiece!' He may easily content himself with that alone . . ."* But theory and practice have never gone hand in hand with D'Annunzio.

But as if that were not enough D'Annunzio, proud as any bourgeois father at the arrival of his first-born, writes jubilantly to a friend:

"Dear Vittorio,—You have a thousand reasons to be angry, and I permit you to apply the strongest epithets to me, but at least admit that I can plead extenuating circumstances.

"Your letter arrived when I was torn between the imminence of a certain event and the completion of a novel. Your reminder reached me at the moment when, like a good father, I was administering a spoonful of warm mallow to my shrieking—bleating—mewing—blubbling—grunting infant!

"With the best will in the world, could I have found time to take up my pen?

"Are you placated—or are you still wild with me?

"Well, I have a baby, a boy, a beautiful boy with two immense azure eyes and five blond hairs. He is a soft little lump, all pink, warm and palpitating, with movements that make you think of a spider, endowed with the grace of a young monkey, shrilling like a little beast, and at other times superhuman! Oh, blessed state of fatherhood!

"I have called him Mario, because it would have been pure affectation to have sought a more elaborate name. Would you have preferred Bellerophon, Draghignazzo, or Torobabele?"

His sympathy for children was not limited to his own, for a

few years later, staying at Francavilla as a guest of the painter Michetti, and his host being absent, he wrote to him of his small boy, Giorgio Michetti:

" . . . Another piece of news! For the last few days Giorgio has been able to sit down by himself! He has a small chair on which he places his little bottom with great dignity every morning. You will be enchanted when you see him.

"One more . . . when he has to pass through the corridor he wears on his head a large Phrygian cap which I gave him, red and green with little wings. He looks simply magnificent in it. What a pity that he lacks a more stately gait! But judging by a few experiments, which, flanked by two or three cushions, he undertakes daily on the carpet, I feel entitled to prophesy that he will soon stand up and walk.

"For practically every small act of life, Giorgio has a special costume and ceremonial, like a tiny Byzantine Emperor."

Need anything more be said?

* * * * *

It seems to me that, up to this point, his family life could have been recorded by either Mme de Sévigné or Alessandro Manzoni. Had the Poet died at that moment, it would have been a great national and artistic calamity, but the classic epitaph "a model husband, son and father" would have been perfectly apposite; it might have been set, with his photograph beautifully executed in enamel, on a broken column over his grave.

But—prepare yourself for the story of some terrible crime, a crime deserving pathological investigation, since only a corrupt mind could have conceived it—it came to pass that D'Annunzio wearied of his wife and allowed himself adventures outside the marriage bond.

A few years before his marriage he had written jokingly: *"Alas for happiness! The rosy splendour of the honeymoon rusts little by little and the sickle of the waning moon sets like a threatening arc. Rubicundo turgescit cynthia cornu."*

To sum up, he has ever been a follower of the famous Hammurabi, who (3000 years B.C.) declared that adultery committed by the husband was neither to be punished nor condemned.

Sinner and wanton! How should any honest man tire of his legitimate consort, of the mother of his children?

So some fiery Lenten preacher might have said fifty years ago: it is doubtful whether he would say it now.

Let us listen instead to what that lovely, sweet and admirable creature, Donna Maria D'Annunzio, had to say when, thirty years later, she spoke to me of all this in Paris and gave me her views on the "shameful desertion."

Let us listen to her, since her testimony is above suspicion.

"Gabriele, *poveretto*, cannot really be blamed for our separation; he is the kindest soul in the world: courteous, helpful, delicate, of an almost feminine sweetness of disposition. Once in some small altercation he seized me a little roughly by the arm, and he was as penitent as if he had been guilty of real brutality, and begged my pardon with tears in his eyes.

"It is true that he never had any real grasp of family life or its duties; he was always first and foremost a poet. The practical side of life was beyond him. When, in the early days of our marriage (we already had three small boys), we were faced by some trivial financial difficulty, he would leave the house for days on end, and before going would tell me to have a good look in his drawers, where he was certain I should find *something*. But all I ever found were sheets of paper scribbled over with unfinished verses and sonnets."

I find no difficulty in satisfying my readers' curiosity as to the supposed divorce between Donna Maria di Gallese and Gabriele D'Annunzio. Even if at one time the Poet considered this possibility, he would nevertheless never consent to assume, even temporarily, a foreign nationality, the necessary preliminary step, since divorce has never existed in Italy; not only so, but there has never been, as has so frequently been asserted, any form of legal separation.

The truth of the matter is that for many years D'Annunzio and his wife have lived apart by mutual consent, a fact which in no way affected their matrimonial status. The conclusive proof is that Donna Maria bears legally the title of Princess de Montenevoso.

All other versions of the story are false and calumnious.

With regard to the lack of tenderness displayed by the Poet

towards his wife, Dame Legend has again made a mountain out of a molehill.

True, D'Annunzio's conduct has never been characterised by any special generosity towards his absent wife, whose conduct has always been a model of propriety; but to his credit it may be said that, while for many years his own material situation was far from prosperous, his wife's fortune has always enabled her to maintain her position—in her apartment of the Piazza di Spagna, where she has received the best Roman society, in Paris, in the Avenue de Villiers, and, in fact, wherever she has happened to be.

For my own part, I have never heard complaints from Donna Maria, who has always manifested the most sincere friendship for me, and has often written to me asking for news of D'Annunzio. If the absence of demands for maintenance on Donna Maria's part is to be attributed almost exclusively to the nobility of her disposition, it may also in part be explained by the fact that at times, and when circumstances have permitted, her husband has in fact provided for her.

In proof of this, I can testify to the excellence, the affection and even, occasionally, the tenderness of their relationship, and considering that their separation has endured for over forty years, this is no mean testimonial. So true is this, that even when D'Annunzio and his wife met to discuss the projected divorce nothing more was heard about it, though this famous interview lasted from eight in the evening to noon of the following day. Perhaps the length of the interview was one of the chief reasons why the "immoral proposal" came to nothing.

While D'Annunzio was in Paris in 1911, supervising the production of *Saint-Sébastien*, his wife often wrote to him from Rome, telling him about her life there and recalling the past.

"I have received papers from Paris which speak of *Saint-Sébastien*, and the Italian papers report that there is some talk of anti-Jewish demonstrations on account of Ida Rubinstein's appearance. Is it true?

"What a pity that they should begin to show disrespect to Art in France!

"Rome is unfortunate! Filth everywhere, not only in the streets but in the private lives of men. Where is the Rome of

yore, of 25 years ago? Only the flowers and the almond branches on the Piazza di Spagna recall it, and even those one can no longer admire in peace; the atrocious trams converge on one from two sides at once!

"Write to me and tell me all about yourself. Take care of your health. My remembrance to Antongini. I kiss you tenderly.

"MARIA."

When later she returned to Paris, D'Annunzio frequently saw his wife, took her flowers or sent them to her by me, and made her the confidante of his good and bad fortune. He wrote to me in Paris in 1911: "*Go and see Donna Maria and take her a bouquet of roses from me.*"

During a short period when Donna Maria was ill and in bed, he visited her daily and spent long hours in her room.

Finally, to appease her old French maid, who had never seen any man take so many liberties with her mistress, Donna Maria was driven to confess that this was her *husband*.

She has also made several long visits to the Vittoriale.

This is the true story of the relationship between D'Annunzio and Donna Maria. Always, in spite of their separation, she has followed with joy and pride the ascent of her strange spouse towards effulgent and undreamed-of glory.

* * * * *

Those who love Gabriele D'Annunzio and those who hate him, who have, in fact, followed his progress, ought, so one would think at least, to show some interest in his family. Yet, as I have said, no one seems to have any clear idea on the subject. It would be fitting, then, to give it some attention. Apart from his wife, it consisted of his father Francesco, his mother Luisa, three sisters: Anna (called Nannina), Ernesta and Elvira, a brother Francesco, three legitimate sons, Marco, Gabriele and Ugo (called Veniero), and, if we are to be scrupulously truthful, one illegitimate daughter, Renata—ten people in all.

I have already given his opinion of his father. Let us now see what he thinks of the rest.

Of his relationship with his three sisters and his brother there is little to say. It was tender and affectionate, especially

with Elvira, whose favourite D'Annunzio was from childhood.

But if we leave aside the early period of life in the paternal home at Pescara, they were limited during the following thirty years to a few infrequent letters, and to the still rarer visits of the Poet to his relations, who, with the exception of his brother, all resided at Pescara.

In 1914 Elvira died, and the Poet received the sad news whilst in Paris.

To measure the depth and the duration of D'Annunzio's sorrow one would need to penetrate into his innermost heart, for he never reveals his feelings, regarding each revelation as a weakness unworthy of a man like himself, inured to all the blows of Fate.

When the unexpected news was suddenly broken to him, he betrayed, as I saw, a sort of bewilderment, and wanted time for solitude and meditation. This mood lasted a few days. Then life once more took its hold on him. I cannot say what scars the bereavement left on his heart, for he gave me no sign of them.

Distance and the divergence of their way of life have greatly loosened the ties between him and his brother Francesco, a very talented musician, who has resided for many years in the United States. D'Annunzio has seen nothing of him for over thirty-five years, but when he speaks of him, it is always with kindness, as of a beloved but distant friend.

* * * * *

The detractors of Gabriele D'Annunzio have never stressed the Poet's lack of affection for his brother and sisters, the existence of whom is unknown to the majority. The relationship on which they have always harped is that with his sons, perhaps because it is the more delicate of the two.

If his detractors are to be believed, D'Annunzio has always been inhuman and unnatural towards his progeny. He has abandoned them to their fate, deprived them of his help, often refused to receive them, nearly always ignored them, even in the most difficult moments of their lives, which, according to his ill-wishers, invariably coincided with those when his own existence was marked by opulence, splendour and dissipation.

Let us examine what truth there is in this interpretation of the Poet's natural feelings.

I maintain that life has given me exceptional opportunities for forming an independent judgment on the question. I have passed decades with the father, who has continually shared with me both the trouble caused and the satisfaction given him by his children; but this has never prevented his sons and daughters from considering me their friend. They regard me almost as a relative, a "hyphen" between their father and themselves, and they always treat me with brotherly affection. I have lived for long periods with all of them; I have listened to their recriminations and tried to pour oil on the troubled waters and to smooth down the divergences of opinion which divided them.

I am speaking particularly of the two elder sons, Mario and Gabriellino, and of the daughter Renata. The third son, Veniero, is very independent and high-spirited. Brought up in Switzerland, away from his parents, he later emigrated for business purposes to America, where he has become a veritable "self-made man." He has little intercourse with his father, from whom he has asked nothing, or with myself, so that I have little knowledge of his disposition.

With Veniero, as I say, the father has had no chance to be either kind or strict, solicitous or indifferent, because he has seen him very seldom, and only for the briefest of periods.

He has never much occupied himself with art or literature: he is an extremely intelligent business man, who, having gone to New York as the representative of an important Italian automobile firm, has become wholly Americanised (I mean, of course, in the favourable sense of the word), and has entirely adopted the tastes, tendencies and mode of life of his new country.

Whenever his father sees him or speaks of him, it is with a sort of surprised complacency, as though saying, "You see? I have succeeded in producing a specimen of that type, a son who lives on his own, never asks me for anything and derives no advantage from bearing my name. Don't you think that a real achievement?"

Physically, Veniero is the perfect blend, deriving features

from each of his parents, whilst Mario is an exact replica of his father in maturity and Gabriellino of him in adolescence.

Veniero has been long married and has a daughter, Anna Maria, who always occupied a special niche in D'Annunzio's affections.

One day, at Fiume, I witnessed the arrival of yet another American, with a round youthful face, serene eyes, and a step still brisk in spite of a certain tendency to put on weight. He spoke French like a Frenchman, Italian like a Roman, English like an American. His accent revealed his transatlantic origin, however much he might abstain from chewing gum, wearing horn-rimmed spectacles, or saying "yeah" instead of yes. At odd moments he broke into whistling rag-time, and after having minutely inspected Fiume, he declared that the "enterprise" had not yet reached "its full efficiency." Who could this be who dared express himself in such terms? Who was he? None other than Veniero—Veniero D'Annunzio.

It was he, duly Americanised, who had come to visit his "Daddy," now a chief of state.

"He possesses that cell of practical common sense which has always been absent from his father's brain," to quote D'Annunzio's own words.

I observed the young man more attentively: I recognised the sensual nose, the wide nostrils, the expressive lips, the somewhat drooping eyelids, the shape of his head, *heavy like bronze*. In him I find again the inimitable gestures and gait of his father.

But instead of the glaucous eyes of D'Annunzio, mysterious and terrible like the enamelled orbs of antique statues, I find Veniero's clear, fluid and transparent like those of Donna Maria.

He is not perpetually sunk in the ecstatic contemplation of Papa's glory.

He tells us a little story. One day, in a Pullman, an old lady was reading the paper. "By the way," she said, "who is Gabriele D'Annunzio?" And the husband, very astonished, replied: "You've never heard of him? Such a beautiful voice!"

"In that crucible into which seventeen races have poured the most incongruous materials to cast the bronze of the future America, Veniero, son of Gabriele D'Annunzio, and of a

Roman princess, is a precious grain of gold dust." (L. Koschnitzky, *The Centaurs of Fiume*.)

* * * *

Let us now pass to Mario, the "roseate" boy, destined to be Prince di Montenevoso.

Of a fundamentally kind nature, extremely honest, incapable of any but the most scrupulous fair play, in this resembling his two brothers, Mario D'Annunzio merits a close study. He possesses in an embryonic form all D'Annunzio's characteristics, apart from his creative genius. The generosity and the contempt for money are identical in both; but given the paucity of the son's resources, spending with him becomes a sort of subconscious urge.

D'Annunzio's sense of humour, ever to the fore in his conversation, and of a consummate elegance, reappears in Mario in a disconcerting form. His speeches and his letters are so full of this *outré*—clowning, that D'Annunzio finds them simply irresistible. Like his father, he detests change and uncertainty. Exactly like his father, he shows a tremendous enthusiasm in outlining programmes for the future. He admires D'Annunzio as an artist but not as a man.

Mario, by nature a sceptic, always regards his father as an extremely able and great comedian on the stage of life: he invariably doubts the sincerity of the paternal gestures and posturings, in whatever quarter or in whatever manner they chance to manifest themselves, and the father is always conscious of this unexpressed censure on the part of his son.

* * * *

The make-up of D'Annunzio's second son, Gabriellino, apart from the inherent rectitude and honesty which he shares with all the Poet's children, is totally different from that of D'Annunzio, which perhaps explains why all the father's sympathies are given to his second-born.

Of a sweet and affectionate disposition, Gabriellino has always understood the art of "getting round" his father. Although far from blind to the latter's defects—for which, by the way, he always finds excuses—he admires him unconditionally as an artist, and his frequent expression of this admiration is

naturally gratifying to D'Annunzio's *amour-propre*. This attitude of his, and particularly the fact that he appreciates the sincerity which inspires D'Annunzio's literary work even more than the work itself, is naturally more welcome to D'Annunzio than that of his elder brother, in whose eyes the Poet always seems to feel, a hidden contempt for the purity of his intentions.

Gabriellino has the soul of an artist, very sensitive, even if slightly opinionated.

Disinterested to the point of excess, he has never asked for help, even in the most difficult moments of his life; so that his father has told me more than once that at times he has had literally to force the boy to accept his gifts.

Contrary to the wishes of his parents (he spent his childhood with his mother in Paris), he decided to become an actor, and, thanks to his sweet-tempered obstinacy, he succeeded.

He played in various of the best Italian companies, under the pseudonym of "Steno," and if he was not to become a Novelli or a Zacconi, he did achieve success.

Of his theatrical career, which, by the way, was brief, I remember only one anecdote.

At the end of a performance of *Fiaccola sotto il Moggio*, a drama which had a very mixed reception on the part of the public, D'Annunzio met Gabriellino, who had interpreted the part of "Simonetto," in a corridor of the theatre, and, opening his arms wide to him, exclaimed: "*Come into my arms, parricide!*"

Later Gabriellino gave up the stage, and, thanks to his refined and artistic sense, has become the director of a distinguished film company.

The production of the *Nave*, a memorable achievement, which marked a considerable advance in the art of the cinema, was due to him.

* * * * *

Renata is the Poet's only daughter. She is the offspring of a youthful and long-lasting liaison with a Neapolitan noblewoman. His daughter has always adored her father, and has never forgotten him for a single moment, not even during the years she spent at the Collegio della Quercia, in Florence.

She wrote to him frequently in the handwriting of a

well-brought-up schoolgirl, giving the far-off papa all the details of her life, which was that of a little prisoner longing for liberty.

"MY ADORED PAPALETTO,

"I have tried to grow good and strong, so as to be able to help you. To please you I am studying the things which I imagine will give you most pleasure. Are you satisfied? If you knew how much I have read and with what ardour I have learned things and things. . . . Now I am reading Chateaubriand. . . . After that, my one idea is to see you . . . I am only afraid that I may not be able to understand you . . ."

The dream which she had cherished—to live near her father—came true when she was twenty and joined him in Venice (at the beginning of the war). Fate destined her to bear him company and bring him solace during the long cure which he had to undergo after he was wounded in the eye by the too sudden landing of an aeroplane.

At that painful and tragic period of his life, when he was haunted by the spectre of total blindness, Renata showed herself the most delicate and the most unforgettably sympathetic nurse and companion the poet could have desired.

The pages, full of lofty and emotional gratitude, which the father dedicated to her in the *Notturmo*, calling her "Sirenetta," are, in the eyes of those who witnessed the filial solicitude of Renata, only a merited and adequate reward.

After the recovery of her father Renata got engaged to an officer, whom she married shortly afterwards.

The fact that she was the Poet's illegitimate daughter and that the marriage took place at Venice, where he was staying at the time, gave rise to one of those anomalies with which D'Annunzio's life-story is thickly studded, so that the abnormal looks commonplace when applied to him.

Thus her father and her elder brother Mario were legal witnesses of her marriage—an extremely rare occurrence.

My warm friendship with Renata, whom I have known since she was a child, gained for me the privilege of figuring as one of the complementary witnesses. When we all visited the Praetor of Venice in order to conform with the necessary formalities, to the time-honoured question put to him by the magistrate: "How

old are you?" the Poet, who was then fifty-three, replied imperturbably, "Forty-eight," with an eloquent wink in my direction.

No one, of course, denied this statement, and when it came to my turn, being thirty-nine at the time, I answered in a firm voice, looking straight at D'Annunzio: "Twenty-seven." He smiled, and when we met again a few moments later said: "I am now convinced that you are the right secretary for me."

Some years later Renata set down her impressions of the sad period of D'Annunzio's illness, and took to her father, at the Vittoriale, the pages which she had written and which she desired to publish.

D'Annunzio was not only very deeply touched but greatly interested in the manuscript, and expressed a favourable judgment on its literary merits. The Poet's daughter had, in fact, written down her impressions with grace and sincerity, so that the father not only condescended to meet his daughter's wishes, but actually spoke himself to the publisher for whom the book was intended. He displayed particular interest in its fortunes, because, as he said, it was a vivid human document relating to days which he himself had already described and interpreted from the point of view of a poet.

But after having given his consent to the publication and instructed me to settle all financial questions with the publisher, Mondadori of Milan, he unexpectedly cancelled his instructions in the following wire:

"Please inform Mondadori that manuscript of Renata in need of ample reconstruction and that I consider hasty publication highly inopportune. It would be deplorable if 'Sirenetta' were suspected of mercenary intentions. Act accordingly. Au revoir."

And nothing was left for Renata but to put away her precious book and to wait for a more benevolent and indulgent paternal mood.*

* * * * *

* D'Annunzio, who had so many points of contact with Chateaubriand ("his *Vicomte*," as he called him), differed from him in this: that while the author of *Atala* freely consented to the publication of his servant's memoirs (the cruel and intimate sincerity of which must have been highly disturbing to his poetic romanticism), D'Annunzio not only refused to allow the publication of this book but at a later date prohibited also the publication of some war episodes collected by his faithful servant, Italo Rossignoli.

Even were the legendary description of D'Annunzio true—a description concocted by the malignity of calumnious enemies—two brilliant spiritual jewels would still shine in the coronet of his fame: his love for his mother and his love for his country.

Let us for the moment set aside the second: it was obvious from earliest youth, but there will be time and place to speak of it later. Let us deal now with the first.

It would be difficult to find a love loftier, purer, or more intense than that which D'Annunzio laid at his mother's feet; and there is no question that Luisa D'Annunzio—flower of motherhood—loving, sweet, full of understanding, a daily example of selflessness and all the virtues—fully merited his filial love. Nor is there any doubt that D'Annunzio would have adored her just as much had she been totally different, since his passion for his "Mamma" was noticeable even in babyhood.

He never saw or listened to anyone but his mother: only for her sake was he ready to sacrifice himself; only to give her satisfaction did he find it sweet to suffer; her caresses—a most coveted prize—could alone bring him happiness.

He called her "*that immaculate one whom I find on the threshold of my home each time I return, the one who holds cupped in the palms of her hands the freshest sustenance of my infant soul, so that each time I may drink and be purified.*"

It was only for his mother's sake that I ever saw his habitually dry eyes veiled by tears; and for her sake that I ever saw him sacrifice the money he always so sorely needed.*

"I am yours, I am the blood of your blood . . . I have remained united to you by a strong tie which still emanates from the centre of my being. You go on feeding me. . . . The best part of me, the one which is unknown to my own self, the one which remains unrevealed to me and to others: you hold it still in the depths of your dear self. I know it. I still feel myself palpitating in you, as when I was about to be born."

Thus he wrote to her in accents which were still only the accents of a son, and not yet those of an artist.

From childhood onwards he found refuge in her, the only

* In 1912, while we were at Arcachon and when money affairs were at their lowest ebb, he wrote to me: "*Dear Tom, I beg you to go to the P.O. and take out, under my power of attorney, the 4,000 lire. Wire the money to Donna Luisa D'Annunzio, Pescara (Chieti), Italy, at once.*"

living soul in whose love he has ever believed, the only soul he has truly and profoundly loved.

He constantly recalls the most trifling gestures by which she manifested her affection for him. He told Marcel Boulanger an amusing story at Fiume. *"She always forgave me everything . . ."* he recounted in the caressing voice of a child who remembers. . . . *"She believed whatever I chose to tell her. But she was a good and worthy provincial woman, who never allowed the Christian virtues to be treated lightly. One day, when I was still a small child, we were passing together through Santa Croce in Florence. As we went by the bronze statue of Dante, which adorns that square, I said to her: 'Listen, Mamma mia, I shall work so hard that one day they will raise a statue to me too.' My mother boxed my ears to teach me modesty."*

He wrote, reverting to a small episode of his childhood, which hundreds of sons would have forgotten:

"She used to take my left hand and look at the back of the thumb for a pale scar, and kiss it with lips lighter than the petals of those simple five-leaved roses which she liked so much."

On the devastated fields of the Marne his thoughts went to her every instant. After the victory he experienced a moment of bewilderment. A little later he wrote about these moments:

"For a few seconds the desolate maternal face stands between me and the face of my country, which I seemed to have seen as in a swift and piercing lightning flash."

The mother of the child prodigy followed her absent son with constant thought; he was her favourite and she lavished upon him her adoration, living in solitude through and with him, never allowing herself to distract his work or his peace by forcing him to share the many vicissitudes with which life so unjustly overwhelmed and afflicted her. She spent long hours at her window, lost in reverie, her eyes trying to follow her son into exile. Then she opened his letters, read and re-read them, deriving consolation from his loving words.

How often would he have liked to run to her, and beg her to pour out for him that consolation and comfort which he has always proudly scorned and refused when it has been offered to him by any but the one whom he tenderly called "my own Mammina."

But the days followed each other with their fatal obligations

and their devilish obstacles, and he had to put off eternally the happiness of being reunited to her.

"Perfidious and cruel life cut me off from her, carried me along with it, took from me even the memory of her. But now her presence is eternal, it is consoling and strength-giving. Death is only a purer life." He wrote this some years after her death.

Although fate and circumstances combined to part them, he has always remembered anything that had the slightest connection with her; he quotes her acts and her words, he recalls her *"unforgettable voice."* His thoughts must have gone out to the one who had spanked, caressed and consoled him when, in the *Trionfo della Morte*, he wrote:

"And when his mother turned to him and sat down close to him, he turned round and raised himself from his cushions; he took one of her hands and tried to hide his emotion with a smile. Feigning to look at the engraved stone of a ring, he examined the long, thin hand which a combination of qualities rendered so extraordinarily expressive and which gave him, when it touched his own, a sensation unlike any he had ever experienced before."

In the same book, in the chapter entitled *"Casa Paterna,"* the allusions to the mother (made by the hero of the novel, Giorgio Aurispa) are for the major part applicable to D'Annunzio and his own mother.

The references to the latter are innumerable, but I shall limit myself to quoting a few.

"Tell me, what is the matter with you, my son?"

"It was that dear voice, that unique and unforgettable voice, which resounded in the depths of his soul; it was that voice of consolation, of forgiveness, of advice, of infinite kindness, to which he had so often listened. He at last recognised the tender creature of yesterday . . . the adored one . . ."

"He pressed her between his arms, sobbing, wetting her face with his burning tears, kissing her on the cheeks, on the eyes, on the forehead, in bewilderment."

"Poor dear mother of mine!"

" . . . How sweet had been his mother, what a lovely and tender creature she was then! And how dearly had he loved her in his childhood, in his adolescence!"

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The misfortunes which befell the family and the heroes of the novel were, of course, different from those which affected D'Annunzio's own family; nevertheless, the *living* mother, like the one created by the phantasy of the Poet, had passed through great and small sorrows, through every kind of anxiety, care and adversity; and not only had she accepted them virilely and silently borne the burden, but had fought to the very end in defence of her children and her hearth, the only tangible treasures this world held for her.

Her son's fantastic ascent towards the peaks of glory left Luisa de Benedictis unperturbed. She had foreseen and always firmly believed in it, so great was her faith in her child-prodigy from the time of his birth.

But proud and almost savage by nature, chary of praise and facile love, averse to all the small satisfactions of self-esteem, of which maternal love is often made up, she cherished in the depths of her heart, and revealed to no one, her immense gratification in her favourite's triumph.

Of the books her son sent to her she read only the dedications; then jealousy put them away with his letters and telegrams. When he finished *L'Innocente* D'Annunzio wired: "*To-night I have finished my hard work and think of you with all my soul. Thank you for having made me so strong and so courageous. Be calm.*" Her prayer-book was the only book she ever took into her hands or read. Too many voices had carried to her the echo of the violent attacks and of the enthusiastic eulogies called forth by the appearance of her son's publications; she did not wish for, and perhaps did not feel, the strength to judge him—for this reason, the books were only the outward sign of his triumphant progress.

Holding out the protective hand of her inexhaustible love, she always kept silent watch over him and his works.

He understood this and sang praises in her honour.

"*Glory to thee, O mother!—Be thou the sublime testimonial of my truth under the heavens—O solitary one! O suffering one!—O patient one!—Am I not thy cry?—which, recognised, spreads—over men and brings to the purest among them—thy divine love—thy divine hope—O mother!—Glory to thee!*"

Luisa D'Annunzio died on the 27th January, 1917.

"General Cadorna wished to give me himself (and to me only)," D'Annunzio wrote to me six years later, "the tragic news and allowed my fever to spend itself in walking through the snow. Fever and sorrow rendered me immune from all else."

"After three days' travel I saw her, unmarred by any mark of corruption, radiating a beauty which up to this day I have been unable to interpret. Perhaps I shall never do so.

"She revealed to me in herself the highest achievement of my spirit.

"She showed me the most secret ways of my uncorrupted aspiration.

"After five days in the open bier, surrounded by her people, she was still a stainless image, an intact virtue.

"The crowd in the poor derelict church imagined that she was holy, with a faith that knew no tears.

"The last tears which I saw were shining like something indistinct and reflecting the light. I have not forgotten her. I see her still."

It was the first time that Gabriele D'Annunzio had cried since attaining manhood. The second time was in January, 1921, in the cemetery of Casala, in front of the Dead of Fiume.

On March 1st, 1921, he wrote from Gardone to me in Milan: "You know what my 'duties' are, the monument for my mother's grave, the legalization of Renata's position, and the finding of a house to shelter the flotsam and jetsam of all my shipwrecks."

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And this, readers, is the D'Annunzio whom the world describes as the cynical and systematic destroyer of family affection, the soulless epicure, incapable of the "exalted sentiments" which others, moved by some passing emotion or prompted only by self-interest, are so ready to display.

This is the D'Annunzio who set as a preface to his admitted masterpiece, *La Figlia di Jorio*, the following dedication: "TO THE SOIL OF THE ABRUZZI—TO MY MOTHER—TO MY SISTERS—TO MY EXILED BROTHER—TO MY FATHER BURIED HERE—TO ALL MY READERS—TO ALL MY PEOPLE—TO ALL MY DEAD, I, STANDING BETWEEN THE MOUNTAIN AND THE SEA, CONSECRATE THIS SONG OF THE ANCIENT BLOOD."

CHAPTER XXII

D'ANNUNZIO AND THE THEATRE

The scruples of a *metteur en scène*—Face to face with the audience—The selection of the cast—The Russian Icon—*La Fille du Régiment*—An authentic virgin—The Swallow's dress—A misplaced banana—Françoise de Rimini asphyxiated by gas—The Poet and the fascinating brunette—The divine Sarah—The mysterious theatre of Albano—Le Théâtre de Fête.

ONE day Armand Bour, to whom had been entrusted the *mise en scène* of *Saint-Sébastien*, asked D'Annunzio, with a great show of deference, if he might cut a dozen verses or so from a scene which, purely from the theatrical point of view, he considered too long. The Poet replied precisely as follows: "*My dear Bour, I authorise you not only to suppress as many verses as you see fit but an entire act if it pleases you. A work of art, if it is a work of art, can live even if it is cut into bits—like certain serpents.*"

Armand Bour, thinking that the Poet was giving him to understand that his request was out of place, appeared apologetic. As a matter of fact, there was no touch of irony in the Poet's answer, which corresponded absolutely with his opinions on matters theatrical.

From D'Annunzio's point of view, a play of his may be literally hissed, booed and jeered off the stage without his personal judgment of its artistic value being one whit altered.

I may even go so far as to say that he has never written for the theatre. For him, the theatre is only a form of artistic expression. What counts, the only thing that counts, in D'Annunzio's eyes, even where his theatrical works are concerned, is the publication of his effort in book form.

Had D'Annunzio never been worried about money matters he would have written his plays without even thinking of their eventual performance, just as Chopin wrote his waltzes with utter indifference to the possibility that one day young girls might dance them.

His famous invective against those critics who so violently

attacked his *Plus que l'Amour* was concerned solely with their method and should never be interpreted as an expression of personal resentment due to the fiasco of the play.

I have a hundred proofs that he never takes very seriously the performance of his plays and tragedies. I may even add that these performances frequently provide him with an excellent topic about which to joke and laugh heartily.

On one occasion in my presence, Gabriele Astruc, the impresario of *Saint-Sébastien*, said to him: "I am rather worried because a group of ladies representing the French aristocracy has written me to voice the fear that *Saint-Sébastien*, religiously speaking, may give the impression of a profanation. And I do not want to be accused of having crucified the Saviour for the second time" (Astruc is a Jew).

"My work," replied D'Annunzio, "*is a work essentially mystic, and is unassailable from a religious standpoint. Furthermore, my dear Astruc, when Ida Rubinstein makes her appearance almost naked at the moment of the supplication, it will be too late to protest. The public will have been conquered by that time.*"

Another point is that D'Annunzio is so completely convinced that, with very rare exceptions, the public at large is incapable of understanding him that when the miracle occurs he is more astonished than satisfied. He asks himself what can be the reason for this unanticipated event.

That is what happened in 1904 at the first performance of the *Figlia di Jorio*. The tremendous success of the play being assured in the first act, the author was sought out and practically dragged on to the stage.

D'Annunzio frequently remembers his feelings when he found himself face to face with an audience so deliriously delighted that he did not know whether he was being applauded or insulted.

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To what rules does D'Annunzio conform in the selection of a cast?

It is immediately necessary to make a distinction where sex is concerned.

For the male characters it is a comparatively simple matter.

D'Annunzio merely insists on having those whom he considers the best suited for his play. But when it comes to choosing the actresses, there are complications without end.

To begin with, the Poet is always the slave of obligations of a sentimental origin, due to the solemn promises which he continually made to any would-be stars he happened to meet. There are also the more recent obligations, dating from the moment D'Annunzio began to occupy himself with the presentation of the play, which cannot be overlooked.

Please do not misunderstand me—I am not speaking of the leading part.

In this case, no matter how passionately in love the Poet may be with a woman, the dictates of his heart never warp his judgment.

Eleonora Duse, at the time when the whole world knew of her relations with D'Annunzio, was the greatest actress of the day.

The author based his selection purely upon the consideration which he had for the artistic merit of the actress. This was true in the instance of Sarah Bernhardt, Ida Rubinstein, the Grammatica sisters, Berthe Bady, Madame Franchini and possibly several others.

Apart from these exceptions, it has been D'Annunzio's prevailing habit to choose his actresses with a view to combining the useful with the agreeable. The intention was quite pleasant, but it sometimes failed to function and, on such occasions, the exasperation of the turbulent dramatist knew no bounds.

I hesitate to say how many times D'Annunzio, who, in difficult situations of his own making, can play the rôle of the victim to perfection, has raised his arms to Heaven and has said to me: "*Why is there this unwritten theatrical law which obliges an author, regardless of his feelings, to go to bed with his actresses?*" My answer has never varied: "*Especially in your case! You do everything in your power to keep that imaginary law in constant operation!*"

Another time he said to me of an actress while the rehearsals were in progress: "*As I know quite well that sooner or later the abominable subject would have to be broached, I took advantage of a moment when we were alone in her automobile to propose to her what one always proposes to a pretty woman under similar con-*

ditions. She did not reject my advances, which, I should state, were quite correct, but she replied: *"My dear friend, I am not a woman who indulges in passing fancies. I do not say "no" to you categorically, but if I decide to accept, I warn you that it will be for ever!"* I saw that she was sincere. Fear saved me. And that explains," he concluded, *"how we have been able to remain the best of friends."*

Of still another great actress he said to me:

"I could never love her enough to live with her. The woman has too strong a personality. And besides, I know that she admires me, but she never makes the slightest effort to understand me. When she senses that she is dominated, she weeps—and, unfortunately, when she weeps, she is no longer beautiful."

The following statement was repeated to me by an actress who assured me it was a verbatim version of the Poet's words:

"Make up your mind—You must either love me profoundly or from now on our relations will have to be exclusively artistic. All our sensual approaches have no other result than to make us both waste time and to give rise to reciprocal ill-humour. A theatrical creation, truly perfect, can only be born of the union of the mind and of the body of the author and the actress, for creation is always a birth."

Perhaps the most amusing thing of all is that, if D'Annunzio readily finds extenuating circumstances for himself, he is extremely severe in his judgment of others.

"The theatrical world," he told me, *"is disgusting. One sees nothing but rivalries, jealousies, hatreds and calumnies. It is unbelievable. Unless one had seen it one could not have begun to imagine it. Just to think that P., after the triumph of comedy—a triumph he did not expect and which is due, not only to the intrinsic value of the work but to the talent of that artist who put all her heart and soul and body into the rôle—just to think that he did not even go and congratulate her in her dressing-room! And why not? I ask you. Solely because he feared to wound the feelings of another actress who is distinctly mediocre, but whom P. adores and considers marvellous! Imagine that, during the rehearsals, the actress in question was unable to utter a word or make a gesture without P. crying: 'Perfect! Magnificent! What talent! What a superb interpretation!' Can it be possible that a true artist can have lost his mind to such a degree?"*

D'Annunzio was to perceive, later on and to his own cost, just how deeply dyed was the French theatrical world with intrigue, dishonesty and calumny. (This state of affairs is almost non-existent in Italy, because in that country organised theatrical troupes ignore personal differences, for the most part.) Yes, D'Annunzio was to see all that when he presented in Paris three of his works: *Pisanella*, *Saint-Sébastien* and *Chèvrefeuille*. It should be noted that the selection of the casts in the first two plays was tremendously facilitated by the fact that Ida Rubinstein was not only *première actrice absolue* but was her own impresario and that, with her customary contempt for money and her sovereign cult for art, she left D'Annunzio absolutely free in his choices.

Ida Rubinstein has always considered the manuscript of one of D'Annunzio's plays as of divine origin. To read it, to study it, was, for her, to celebrate a rite, to interpret it a religious ceremony.

Had she been given the opportunity to play one of his tragedies for him and for herself alone, I am sure that she would have accepted with positive joy.

"*She is feverish—*" D'Annunzio said to me of her at the time of *Saint-Sébastien*. "*She thinks, dreams and lives only for her new creation. She asked me whether I thought she should cancel her engagements in Milan. She has employed a French professor for her diction. She is even losing her looks, and that astounds me, for she has only two idols—her art and her body.*"

She wrote to him: "Brother, send me a word with fire in it! I could not sleep last night. I had such ghastly apprehensions! It seemed to me that I never would be able to do anything. Tell me that you know everything will be all right, that you believe in your brother, and I will go to work, so that this afternoon you will be contented as you were the other day."

"*Only once has Madame Rubinstein accompanied an embrace with the words: I love you,*" D'Annunzio told me. "*That was on the evening of my departure from Venice for the conquest of Fiume. But the origin of that rare effusion was certainly heroic, for she added: 'Throw all the English into the sea for my sake!'*"

Ida Rubinstein has been always free from that personal ambition and vanity so characteristic of most actresses. (I

exclude neither Eleonora Duse nor Sarah Bernhardt from that charge.) She has consistently despised the public. If she has not always been indifferent to hisses or applause, nevertheless an abyss separates her from the other women of the theatre.

"*Lost in the midst of the frivolous actresses of Paris,*" D'Annunzio said of her, "*like a Russian icon in a novelty shop in the Rue de la Paix.*"

D'Annunzio has always cherished a real affection for her, but was not deaf at all to her faulty pronunciation of French. He wrote to me one day: "*I want to create a pantomime for her, if only to return her to her original and divine silence.*"* He has never ceased to consider her as an ideal interpretress.

Even for the *mise en scène* of the two tragedies confided to Ida Rubinstein, D'Annunzio's was not a simple task. There endured, month after month, an incessant "battle of the ladies." The Poet, who was quietly finishing his work in Arcachon, was implored continually to return to Paris. As he took very good care to do no such thing, he was swamped daily with venomous letters, full of scandal, in which eventually actresses tore each other's characters into shreds.

"For the love of Heaven, don't give the part to Madame X! The woman's a hundred years old! She can hardly stand without crutches!"

"I have just heard that you have chosen Madame Y. Take care! She brings bad luck to everything and everybody! That is common knowledge!"

"I am told that you are going to give the rôle of 'La Fille Malade des Fièvres' to S. But, my dear man, she is *not* 'La Fille Malade des Fièvres!' She is 'La Fille du Régiment!'"

When I showed these epistles to D'Annunzio, he contented himself with a smile, exactly as when he received frantic appeals from Astruc (Ida Rubinstein had made an exception to her rule and had engaged him as her impresario for *Saint-Sébastien*) to hurry back to Paris. As he knew nothing of the language current in the theatrical world of Paris, Astruc's messages amused him hugely. "You need atmosphere!" "You must hobnob with Bour!" "Madame Simone has thrown up her

* D'Annunzio refers here to the time when Ida Rubinstein played only in pantomime.

job!" "Bady's wild eyes are indispensable!" And so on.

The battle waged even for the selection of the cast.

A *propos* of the "Virgins' chorus" in *Saint-Sébastien*, a lady—a colonel's widow, by the way—wrote to the Poet: "Monsieur Astruc has dismissed my daughter, and I can affirm, illustrious *Maître*, that she is the only girl who, *being really a virgin* (she has never been out of the house except in my company), is worthy to fill the rôle in a work so eminently religious as is yours!"

D'Annunzio turned this letter over to Ida Rubinstein, who—charitable soul!—induced the impresario to re-engage the authentic virgin.

But if the first two tragedies were not devoid of skirmishes, they were nothing as compared with the *mise en scène* of *Chèvrefeuille* at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin.

It was then that D'Annunzio was presented with a priceless opportunity to taste at his leisure all the charms of the theatrical world.

To begin with, there was a courteous conflict with the principal male character, Monsieur Le Bargy. This great actor, who is also a most intelligent and cultivated man, conforming to the methods so dear to the defunct Francisque Sarcey, had taken it into his head to modify the disposition of the scenes in the play. One fine day, bubbling over with enthusiasm, at his home where he had received me, he outlined to me a complete reconstruction of the work, which would have damaged it from a theatrical viewpoint and would have completely altered the *motif* of *Chèvrefeuille*.

When I submitted this pretentious plan to D'Annunzio, he was, as I had foreseen, highly indignant, and went so far as to enter into violent discussions with Le Bargy, of whom he was sincerely fond.

It is almost impossible to describe what occurred where the leading feminine part was concerned! D'Annunzio had made so many promises and contracted so many obligations that he set loose a veritable tempest. At least eight actresses were determined to have the rôle and the Poet, following his habitual system, promised it to them every day—to all eight of them—with identical vows.

When he finally chose Henriette Rogers (after all, it was essential to choose one!), the reader can well imagine the tone of the letters he received, the scenes which those who had been eliminated made for him in private.

I was provided with an unequalled opportunity to exercise my talents as a conciliator in these unpleasant scenes. I was also somewhat favoured, it is only honest to state, by the three exits of the Hôtel d'Iéna, where we were staying. These exits enabled the Poet to escape on more than one occasion. Naturally, it was on my innocent shoulders that the avalanche of grossest recriminations fell. Happily, this only went on for about two weeks, that is to say, until the complete failure of the play, which made those actresses who had been passed over smile acidly and those who had been chosen bilious.

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Meticulous in all his preparations, D'Annunzio is equally so in regard to the *mise en scène* of his plays. No detail escapes him. He desires to control everything, and he exercises his control from the precise spot where the actor should be upon the stage to the colours of a rug; from the intonation of a phrase of secondary importance to the tiniest object which, to his way of thinking, should be on a table or a mantel.

If the impresario is unable to furnish him with everything he demands, D'Annunzio does not hesitate. He promptly purchases, on his own account, whatever he wants, and proceeds to lend these objects to the theatre.

I have only seen him flare up once on the subject of the dress of an actress. That was in *Chèvrefeuille*. The scene almost entailed a lawsuit.

There is in that play a feminine character whom the author calls "The Swallow." Paul Poiret, the famous *couturier*, then at the height of his glory, promised the Poet to create for the actress a dress which, while quite in keeping with the mode of the day, would bring out the author's poetic idea. The charming creation (black and white, with wings very cleverly fashioned) met with great success.

I do not know for just what reason (but assuredly not a

pecuniary one) Poiret sent the bill to the author after the final performance. Perhaps he considered (this is the only conceivable explanation) that the relations of the Poet with "The Swallow" were such as to justify the procedure. It happened that, on the contrary, these relations were not only quite correct but unusually superficial.

Dazed and furious, D'Annunzio instructed me to return the bill to the *couturier*. "Tell him," he wrote me, "that this should be addressed to Monsieur Hertz. I am not accustomed to pay for my actresses' costumes."

Messieurs Hertz and Coquelin, in their turn, declared that, by principle, they would not pay Poiret, since they had not contracted to provide a special dress for this scene. Poiret refused the modest sum they offered, and summoned D'Annunzio before a justice of the peace.

As was always his procedure under such circumstances, D'Annunzio failed to appear, and the incident was closed, to the great disappointment of the sensation-mongers who attended the law court.

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It is rare indeed that the least, the most insignificant anachronism in a *mise en scène* escapes the Poet. I saw him in a towering rage at the second performance of *Pisanella*. In a Cypriote scene which takes place in 1300 he noticed a banana in a huge fruit dish. Not a single critic, not a single spectator had remarked this trifling error.

At the opening performance of *Francesca de Rimini*, at the Théâtre Costanzi in Rome, his exaggerated insistence on historical exactitude caused him endless trouble.

He had refused to hear of anything but a genuine bombardment and actual catapults for the siege of the fortress of the Malatesta.

The result remains unique in the annals of the theatre. A thick, choking smoke, obtained by the chemist Helbig by scientific processes, so thoroughly blinded and asphyxiated the unfortunate spectators that they left the theatre not hissing but howling. And that is not all. A large stone, hurled from a catapult, completely demolished one of the walls of the stage.

The tragedy collapsed, too, almost as utterly as the wall.

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The interest that D'Annunzio shows for his plays ceases to exist almost automatically with the presentation of the work, just as it ceases for a book once the book is published.

But this is even more noticeable where a play is concerned.

D'Annunzio is no longer even a spectator. He becomes so utterly indifferent that he fails even to go to the theatre on the opening night, and conducts himself in a manner quite contrary to all his habits. Sometimes he goes for a long walk alone; more often he takes refuge in a café; and as a rule he scarcely ever goes inside a café. His humour is excellent at these times. He seems to be relieved of all cares and obligations.

At the *première* of *Saint-Sébastien*, he disappeared about nine o'clock. Having sought everywhere for him, I finally discovered him, by the merest chance, in a café near the Châtelet.

Having ordered a cup of coffee, he had promptly fallen sound asleep. I awakened him with all the care which was due to him and told him that all was going well with the tragedy.

"In that case we can go home," he replied.

At the opening of *La Torche sous le Boisseau* in Milan, he installed himself with me in a corner of the Café Biffi, which is only a few yards away from the Théâtre Manzoni, where the play was being performed.

After about an hour and a half he sent me round to the stage door to get the news.

"They are whistling and hissing with all their might," I reported.

He began to laugh and asked me:

"Do you know which scene it is?"

"No."

He consulted his watch. "I'll wager," he said, "that it is the scene of the snake-charmer. I felt positive that the public of Milan would never stand for that!"

At the opening of *Chèvrefeuille* he went with me by the artists' door to the stage in the middle of the second act. We met a fireman who barred our passage, thinking that we were critics or friends of the caste.

"Ah," he said to me calmly, "*so we can't go in? Then come along and have dinner. I'm famished!*"

We entered the Restaurant Maire, on the Boulevard. In a corner a fascinating brunette was dining all alone. D'Annunzio suggested to me: "*Why not invite her to join us?*" "We can try," I replied. And five minutes later we were all three seated at the same table like old friends.

For the sake of saying something, I asked the charming young lady:

"But how does it happen that you are not at the opening at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin this evening?"

"What are they putting on?"

"*Le Chèvrefeuille* of D'Annunzio."

"D'Annunzio? What's that?"

The Poet took her hand and kissed it.

"*You are really an adorable person!*" he declared.

"Why?" she asked laughingly.

"*Because you remind me of myself. I have never understood anything connected with the theatre, and I don't care if I never do!*"

* * * * *

It is not an easy matter to get an estimate of D'Annunzio's opinions of the many interpreters of his works, for it is necessary to begin by eliminating all the lavish letters of appreciation, the innumerable photographs bearing extravagant dedications and the countless equally extravagantly dedicated books which he has presented to so many artists of both sexes.

D'Annunzio is generous by temperament and extremely courteous. It is very rare for him to refuse to sign a photograph or a book along with a flattering line or two even for the humblest of his collaborators or his actors, and he has even been known to do as much for the ushers, and, of course, he exalts, in his dedication, the artistic talents of the actor or the actress.

The fact of the matter is that there are only three of his actresses of whom he has spoken hundreds of times without restriction in terms of admiration and gratitude. They are Eleonora Duse, Sarah Bernhardt and Ida Rubinstein.

There are three more who may be added in a second line:

Emma Grammatica, Berthe Bady and Vera Sergine.

For the men, there are only two to be singled out: Zacconi and Le Bargy. That is final. The others, in his estimation, are far inferior to those two and, in thirty years of intimate life with him, I have rarely heard him mention any of them.

The Poet's judgment of Eleonora Duse is so well known that there is nothing for me to add. The same may be said of Sarah Bernhardt, who wrote to the Poet when he was far less famous than he was to become, at the time of the *Città Morte*: "I pledge you my faith that I will do the impossible, so that the setting, the artists and the conditions may be worthy of your admirable and delicate genius."

For that great French artist who "*had one evening in her living eyes all the blindness of divine statues*,"* as he said so charmingly, the Poet always entertained not only the greatest admiration but an unusual devotion.

A trick of fate willed that she should pass, ill and sad, the last months of her life at Andernos, in the Valley of Arcachon, only half an hour away from the villa where D'Annunzio was living. He went to see her sometimes. One day, on his return from one of those touching visits, he said to me:

"She is truly wonderful. Think of that woman, old, ill, finished, having but one leg on which to stand, paying the debts of her family, that incomparable artist, still acting, leaning on chairs, tables and other actors, with one sole desperate desire (she has confessed it to me)—that of dying some night on the stage in the course of a final triumph." And he added: *"What a Saint-Sébastien she would have created when she was twenty-five!"*

* * * * *

D'Annunzio dreamed three times of possessing a theatre. His first dream was of creating a theatre on the edge of the Lago di Albano, that lonely lake so dear to the gods and to the cardinals of Jules II, which is hidden in the midst of wooded hills a few miles from Rome.

The origin of this dream was rather more sentimental than theatrical. Albano had been, on several occasions, the place

* These words were spoken on the opening night of the *Città Morte*, which took place in 1898 at the Théâtre de la Renaissance.

chosen by the Poet for his amorous adventures, the last of which was that with Eleonora Duse. (She, of course, knew nothing of the preceding visits.)

To anyone who knows this lake, of evidently volcanic origin and encircled by jagged hills, the site where the theatre might have been constructed will for ever remain a mystery.

But the technical problem assuredly never occurred to Gabriele D'Annunzio any more than it did to Eleonora Duse, who was then, like any woman in love, in that state of divine oblivion where only the words of the lover represent truth and reality.

And so, she did not hesitate for a moment to appeal to all the rich men whom she knew, to all the artists scattered over the wide world, to aid her in this magnificent enterprise. Everyone applauded the poetic idea, even those who knew no more of the Lago di Albano than they did of Lake Tanganyika. No doubt they, one and all, supposed it to be surrounded with villas and dotted densely with sailing boats. However, in no single case did the enthusiasm go to the point of subscribing any of the needed capital. The project was abandoned.

The second was the dream of a theatre at Fiesole. Practically, it was more realisable, since it had a basis both moral and material: the old stones of the Roman theatre still existed, to which—if we are to believe the Poet—only his genius needed to be added for their reanimation. But times were hard, and this dream drifted off into the clouds like the other.

The third project was that of the Théâtre de Fête, which was to have sprung up in Paris, and the plan was very nearly carried out. It was by far the most positive of the three dreams.

This was in 1910. The Poet, as I have remarked elsewhere, was the idol of Paris. Apart from this important element of success, there was another which was not to be disdained: the idea had been born, not in a café in Montparnasse or in one of the eating-places of penniless artists, but in several *recherche* salons of which the habitués were all enthusiastic admirers of D'Annunzio. They were by name: La Comtesse de Béarn, Deutsch de la Meurthe, Boni de Castellane, Singer, Maurice de Rothschild, Sarah Bernhardt, Ida Rubinstein, the Poliakoffs, la Comtesse de Noailles, Madame Stern, Mary Garden,

Romaine Brooks, la Comtesse de Maupeou, and many other personalities considered by the *Tout-Paris* as the cream of art, society and finance. In the midst of this Parisian *élite* there floated, with a slightly affected grace and rather equivocal mannerisms, Robert de Montesquiou. He, with his high-pitched voice, stimulated the recalcitrants until they, too, were interested.

A sort of committee was formed. A celebrated lawyer of Paris took the affair in hand. Models of the subscription forms were prepared. D'Annunzio signed each one.

Unfortunately, the project had been launched late in the spring. The result was that the final details were not in readiness until the end of June. Whoever knows Paris cannot help noticing that a proposition, a business deal, a love affair, which is not in an advanced stage before the running of the Grand Prix is condemned to an inevitable stagnation which lasts until the first week in November.

Gabriele D'Annunzio left for Arcachon; the ladies went to the seaside; the gentlemen sought their favourite casinos; the actresses sailed away to foreign lands. Le Théâtre de Fête sank like the galleys of Tiberius, and it never occurred to a soul to salvage it.

CHAPTER XXIII

CONFESSIONS OF AN ANONYMOUS LADY

The Lady at Versailles—Madame de B——'s fat letter—"Cave canem"—and the master!—In the realm of perfume—A strange kimono—The Poet's seductive voice—The roses of dismissal.

I MET Madame de B—— in Paris in 1919. She was not a Frenchwoman by birth, but she had lived in France for many years. She was perhaps thirty-five, of a calm, sweet beauty which I may qualify as resigned. She talked little, but she listened divinely, her lovely oval face illumined by great grey eyes which had an expression of childlike wonder.

We soon discovered that we not only admired but knew personally many artists of considerable note, and our acquaintanceship was rapidly transformed into that charming *camaraderie* which can exist between a man and a woman only if the man's affections are engaged elsewhere. I made no effort to divert our agreeable relationship into more dangerous, if more enchanting channels. Had I attempted to do so, I would doubtless have been quickly rebuffed and, therefore, I congratulate myself on having, for once, known how to let well enough alone.

Madame de B—— lived in an unpretentious-looking but luxurious little apartment in the quiet rue de Madame at Versailles and, on my very first visit, one of the first things I noticed was a photograph of Gabriele D'Annunzio which bore one of his inimitable dedications.

Naturally enough, the conversation, from that day on, was frequently about the Poet, and also about these memoirs which I had just commenced to write. Madame de B—— displayed a vivid interest in my work—so much so that it was not long before she asked me to read some of the chapters. And then, most unexpectedly, she questioned me as to the information I had for the compilation of D'Annunzio's amorous history, and she added quickly: "For, of course, no book about D'Annunzio

would be complete were Love not given a prominent place!" Something in her manner led me to take my courage in both hands and suggest to her that, quite possibly, she could tell me many things of which I was in ignorance.

Madame de B—— was not at all offended by my temerity, and she promised me her anonymous collaboration. To be brutally frank, I attached but little importance to this promise, made in a moment of enthusiasm, because experience has taught me that women instinctively fear indiscretions even when they are certain to profit by them. But I was destined to be pleasantly surprised, for, a month or so later, having returned to Italy, I received a letter from Madame de B——, who was visiting at St. Jean-de-Luz.

The following is a faithful and complete translation of what I read in clear, round writing on closely covered sheets of azure paper:—

"Mine is a truthful race and, for that reason, I shall strive to confine myself to facts, although I am sitting down to unfold one of those unforgettable episodes which it would be delightfully easy to embellish for my own satisfaction; and I ask you to listen to me as you have so often done before—as an indulgent and trusting friend. Will you?

"I would be lying were I to tell you that my heart was beating quietly when, one day in April, 1905, I arrived, all alone, before the dreaded gates of the Capponcina. On the pillar on the left I read 'Beware of the dog!' and on that on the right 'Beware of the master!' This second warning did not help to inspire me with the courage and the presence of mind which I was particularly desirous of attaining. But I want to assure you that, although I was prepared both by gossip and by confidential information for an amorous assault on the part of the redoubtable owner of this mysterious abode, I was firmly convinced that I possessed the necessary wiles to defend myself, and I foresaw a retreat which, if not glorious, would be dignified and honourable. Oh yes, I had read the words, '*I shall expect you alone,*' with a full appreciation of their meaning, but nevertheless I felt that I could take care of myself.

"I was satisfied that, without being a raving beauty, I was

graceful and alluring, and I confess that, on this occasion, I had neglected no feminine ruse to enhance my charms. Although many of my friends do not agree with me, I insist that beauty, for a woman, is frequently a defence rather than a weakness, because men often fear that, by a premature or precipitate act, they may break the spell it has woven about them.

"It is extremely difficult for me to describe accurately just what my feelings were at that moment, but I remember that I was disturbed by a thousand different thoughts and considerations. My great self-confidence was increased by my unusual experience with men and life, but I know that I was conscious of an indefinable anxiety. I was at once pleased because I had brought myself to accept this invitation and fearful of the possible consequences which might make me live to regret my audacity. But, apart from these premonitions, my mind was filled, to the exclusion of everything else, with one preoccupation: *I must not appear ridiculous in the eyes of Gabriele D'Annunzio!*

"I am sure that the women who read this confession will understand me; but I have not the same confidence in the men, for they are so mistakenly sure that their own gestures, especially where love-making is concerned, are more open to ridicule than those of the clumsiest women. It is a question I am always ready to argue.

"But I must get back to my adventure. Having, as I have said, arrived at the gates of the villa, and having dismissed my carriage, I tugged at the bell, which set up a timid, distant tinkling such as one might expect to hear in a convent. It was so promptly answered by a servant that, for an instant, I thought the man had sprung from the ground before my eyes. He bowed and then he opened the gate so cautiously as to give me barely room to enter. As I passed him, I had a strange sensation: his glance seemed to undress me, and I recalled a vulgar witticism which I had heard in a salon a few days before when the conversation had, as is inevitable, turned to women: 'A young and pretty woman who calls on a man under sixty carries, morally if not actually, a night-gown in her bag,' I blushed.

"It was the first and the last time that I blushed on that day, which is marked with a red letter in my memory. When you have read what follows, this will sound like a very strange

assertion, but, for all that, it is the truth.

"D'Annunzio greeted me on the threshold of his villa. I completely regained my composure the minute my eyes fell on him. I often think that the intensity of a danger is greatly lessened when, after having lurked ominously in the background, it suddenly comes very near to hand. I saw in the Poet only the courteous nobleman about to receive from his little 'sister,' as he called me, a visit prompted by admiration for his art. By the way, perhaps you noticed his word 'sister' on the photograph in my salon. He gave it to me the very first day we met.

"All my apprehensions were gone, and I remember experiencing a sort of shame for having entertained them at all. It seemed absurd, and even unjust, to have misgivings in regard to Gabriele D'Annunzio, about to welcome a visitor in his home. You know the Capponcina far better than I do, so I can spare you what would doubtless be a boring description of the rooms I saw.

"The servant having vanished, my host helped me out of my coat, and I crossed the curious room which was combined to make a hall and a dining-room. I went boldly towards the small sitting-room on the right, because I had been in it before when I had come to the villa with friends.

"The first shock in store was for my nostrils. The air was heavy with incense, mingled with the fragrance of innumerable roses. They were everywhere—in vases, in amphoræ, in bowls—and their petals were strewn on the carpets. Still another perfume pervaded the place, but I could scarcely detect it, for I was using it myself. It was '*Acqua Nuntia*'—as you know, an invention of the Poet's. He had given me a bottle and, in his honour, I had sprayed it lavishly on my hair and on my dress. D'Annunzio immediately remarked it, and thanked me gallantly for the compliment I paid him.

"And here, if you are fully to understand my confession, I must make an explanation. For a very simple reason, I shall quote but a very few of the Poet's words. When he talked, he did not employ the rare words to be found in his books, but—and surely because he did not wish to appear affected—he used those expressions which were current at the time. Of course, he turned his phrases masterfully, and his choice of words was faultless, but it was not in this respect that I found his con-

versation so strikingly different from that of other cultured men. I decided that the seductive and suggestive power of his talk was due to his musical pronunciation, to the rhythm of his expressions and to the enchantment of his voice. These rare qualities are difficult to analyse, but believe me when I tell you that they had a profound effect on me.

"I shall try to keep to my story from now on. For me, the overpowering perfumes in the room were distressing and not a little voluptuous. The odour of incense dominated, and I had rather the impression of being in a church than in a man's home. I stood it as long as I could, and then I complained politely to my host. As I had foreseen, he begged me to remove my hat when I confided my discomfort to him, D'Annunzio smiled and said '*Really?*' as though mine was an astonishingly freakish sensation. However, he quickly threw open a French window which opened on the terrace.

"It was early in April. Quantities of wistaria ran along the balustrade and, climbing over a pergola, formed a canopy through which there penetrated only a diffused mauve light, divinely unreal. Outside, the peace of the Florentine springtime was disturbed by the cooing of the pigeons in the dovecot and by the rustling of their wings. On a small ebony table by the window was a large silver tray, bearing a samovar, two cups, an array of silver plates with fondants, *marrons glacés*, chocolates and other sweets. D'Annunzio asked me if I liked tea and when I assured him truthfully that it was my favourite beverage, he began to prepare it.

"He went about it gracefully, deftly, with rather feminine gestures and, now and then, he glanced at me in a way which I might have qualified as timid had I sought to flatter myself. It was only at that moment—I can swear to this—that I perceived that my host was dressed in an unusual fashion. He wore a strange dark blue kimono, bordered with black and cut on the lines of a monk's tunic. His arms were bare to the elbow. His neck, likewise, was uncovered. This kimono was not unbecoming, and D'Annunzio wore it with an air. When I asked him why he had chosen such an original costume, he answered that it was not original for him, and that if, when last I had seen him, he had been attired in '*civilian clothes*,' it was

because he had just come in from riding and had had no time to change.

"He poured the tea—a China tea—which I have always detested as being too light and too perfumed, but which on this occasion I declared "delicious" for the sake of form. He sipped his own and, suddenly and without preliminaries, he sat down on the rug close by my side and adopted the cross-legged pose of a Turk or a tailor.

"Instinctively I was tempted to move away a little so that he would not touch my body, but I caught myself in time, realising that such a gesture would be absurdly prudish and out of place. It would have been to attach undue significance to an act of his which was quite possibly unpremeditated, and it might have caused him to think me frightened at a moment when I was distinctly at my ease. But, a second later, the Poet removed all doubt as to his intentions by taking my two hands in his and caressing them while he talked to me very slowly.

"Years have elapsed since that epoch-making afternoon, and life has not only altered my point of view but changed my character. I have become the prey of a scepticism which has destroyed in my heart and mind all that there once was of the sentimental, poetical, innocent and youthful. Therefore, it is not under the influence of a recent seduction that I make these confessions which I may well entitle 'Out of the Past.' Yet even now I can admit to myself that, had I possessed the necessary strength and foresight, I would have frankly stated on the day following my visit to the Capponcina that when D'Annunzio began to talk to me I was quite aware that my self-control was wafted away, and that I was prepared to suffer at his hands all that he might be pleased to demand. It would be utterly impossible to repeat what he said to me, but I know that, from the minute he opened his mouth, I was lost. I realised that his declaration of love, with its paralysing effect on the feminine will-power, was more comparable to opium than to the influence of ordinary human persuasion.

"His voice seemed to dominate and destroy my very personality with a magical force. There are words which burn more delightfully than the most passionate of kisses. D'Annunzio seemed to have them all at his command. There are kisses and caresses

which are more soothing than the most consoling words. He possessed them, too.

"From his gestures, from his voice there came a limitless and invincible wave of desire which engulfed me and enveloped my whole being in an irresistible atmosphere of love which did away with whatever resistance I still retained. The woman to whom he spoke felt herself isolated from everything that represented her usual life and was transported, in spite of herself, into mysterious spheres where there are no laws nor conventions.

"There was something so intensely human and compelling in this man's suppliant ardour that flesh and blood could not resist him. He seemed to desire love as a man dying in the desert waste desires water.

"Until that day I had been persuaded that mine was the strength capable of repulsing the advances of any living mortal, but I was sadly, or gladly, mistaken. I was doomed to realise the truth of the saying which is attributed to Madame de Staël: 'In this world there are no women without temperament; there are only clumsy men.' I believe that only a profoundly stupid woman could have emerged unscathed from that meeting, and I wonder whether such an escape would have been preferable. For myself and my own reactions, I refuse to answer.

"It is possible that, with feminine guile, I might have, by a brusque word or gesture, broken the enchantment of D'Annunzio's words and voice. I might have jumped up or knocked over the tea-cup, and thus have contrived to save my will-power and to preserve the lucidity of my thoughts. Some of your readers will insist that I should have done just this. True enough—in a way. The truth is that I had given up all desire to resist before it occurred to me that I still could do so.

"I should point out that, in those days, I was completely my own mistress and absolutely free to live my own life. I depended on no one, and no man or woman had a right or reason to try to control my actions. I fully appreciate that, morally, this is worse than no excuse. It is my desire here to explain and not to find exoneration. The details which concern the development of this adventure can have no interest, and I am in no mood to attempt to relive them here. It will be sufficient to tell you that, from that day, I have never been able to read without

deep emotion certain passages of *Peccato di Calen di Maggio*.

"Drugged by the delicious poison of the Poet's musical words, I 'fell asleep' in that little sitting-room bathed in mauve light. Before my eyes on the wall was the marvellous 'Prisoner' of Michelangelo, and its divine beauty seemed somehow contorted. I regained consciousness in the green twilight beneath the frozen stare of the 'Auriga of Delphi.'

"Not only you but all those who knew the Capponcina will remember distinctly in just which charming room the poor sinner found herself!

"A quarter of an hour later I found D'Annunzio in the library, where he was turning the leaves of a book, by the shaded light of a clepsydra transformed into a lamp. He was in evening dress. He accompanied me to the gates, thus sparing me the embarrassment of facing the servant who knew the hour of my arrival. D'Annunzio uttered not a word and for that delicate discretion I have always been extremely grateful to him. When we reached the gates, he lingeringly kissed my hands, '*to warm them,*' so he said; and the truth is that they were icy cold. He helped me into the carriage he had summoned for me.

"As I drove away, my hands fell on something very soft and fresh to the touch—roses. The inside of my carriage was filled, like a rich coffin, with their exquisite perfume. I cannot tell you whether I was happy or sad. It is only when time has passed that a woman can surely define her sensations. But I believe that other women will understand me when I say that I think I experienced the horrid sensation of being discarded like a toy. I was also suffering physically from the throbbing of a vicious headache.

"Night had fallen when I left that Capponcina which I had dreamed so often of visiting some happy day, and which I now knew only too intimately. I was never to set my foot inside its doors again.

"I have never received a single word from D'Annunzio.

"Years afterwards, mingling with the crowd which had gathered to hear him as he stood on a balcony in Rome and urged Italy to enter the war, I heard his voice again. It no longer fell on me like a caress, but stung me like a lash."

* * * * *

I heard nothing more of Madame de B. I wrote to her at Versailles but I never had any reply.

One day, twelve years later, at the Vittoriale, I asked D'Annunzio if he had ever known a certain Madame de B.

He reflected a little, and then with a, certainly sincere, intonation of indifference said: "*I remember her very vaguely . . . I must have made her acquaintance at the time of La Figlia di Iorio . . . if I don't mistake . . .*"

"Was she beautiful?" I then asked him.

"I think so," he replied, and said nothing more.

CHAPTER XXIV

D'ANNUNZIO, BUSINESS MAN

Business men at grips with D'Annunzio—D'Annunzio avenges the unfortunate poets—D'Annunzio and Lenthéric—How, for an hour, I impersonated Gabriele D'Annunzio—A marriage by proxy—D'Annunzio and the Stock Exchange—The famous Horse of Leonardo da Vinci—D'Annunzio studies a "Titian"—The ideal kind of cheque—D'Annunzio tries newspaper work—The bare arms of the beautiful Roman ladies—"Carmina non dant panem"—The mournful pedagogues—D'Annunzio sets "stars" on their courses—D'Annunzio and Hearst—The Poet and the *Matin*—Our Lady of Bluff—the vagaries of Transatlantic cables—The corpse-galvaniser—D'Annunzio's dream of a puppet-theatre—The business instinct of a poet

I HAVE often heard it said, and by no means jokingly, that D'Annunzio is a first-class "business man."

The verdict has been pronounced by "other" business men who have entered into negotiations with him over some literary or theatrical, or even some purely commercial enterprise on which they have set their hearts. Consequently the opinion cannot be accepted at its face value; for, coming from such a source, and translated into plain language, it may simply mean, "where money is concerned, D'Annunzio, though a poet, is not, as we mistakenly hoped and imagined, a man to allow himself to be duped."

This opinion, whether it reaches him through others or is uttered in his presence, always gives D'Annunzio intense pleasure, and he never fails to repeat it when occasion offers.

Let us examine how much truth there is in the statement, so welcome to D'Annunzio's ears, principally because business lies outside the sphere of his immediate interests; let us also see whether he couples with this definite attribute of not allowing himself to be worsted over a deal that other one, indispensable to the real business man, of knowing how to dupe others.

In real life D'Annunzio is very acute. No one could be more of a poet and at the same time less of a poet than he. The word "poet," taken as a negation of all that represents the practical

side of real life, does not fit him. The moment Gabriele D'Annunzio lays aside his pen and stops thinking about his art he regains the lucidity necessary to arrive at an exact estimate of those worldly goods which can either be exploited to his advantage or cause him material harm.

Melpomene, Calliope and Polymnia bear him company only during his working hours; they have the good sense and the intelligence to take a walk in the garden when their favourite has to occupy himself with his worldly interests.

The most expert, astute, and wily business man is fatally handicapped at the moment of his encounter with the Poet, for to such a one Gabriele D'Annunzio represents an unknown adversary, an animal of a new and invulnerable species, to be treated in a special manner, and to whom everything is conceded, permitted and forgiven in advance.

The reason is plain: D'Annunzio deals in wares of an inimitable and irreplaceable quality, and the business man is perfectly aware of this. There is little, if anything, to discuss. The dilemma is of the simplest, and the business man knows also that he must submit without protest to D'Annunzio's stipulations—or retire from the contest.

To an able negotiator, true, there remains the hope of convincing the Poet, that is, of inducing him, by reasoning and argument, to modify his original terms.

But even this is impossible, for two reasons: the first, that every business man, the moment he has entered D'Annunzio's presence, succumbs to his fatal fascination, falls into that state of "trance" which attacks sceptics, cynics and bluffers alike, and from which no one is immune, even though he has taken every precaution against it in advance.

The second reason is that D'Annunzio, experienced old fox that he is, speaks often and at length of the business in hand, dealing with it on broad lines, showing himself willing and understanding, smilingly prepared to concede anything that may be asked of him. Yet he consistently shies away from any conversation touching even remotely upon the financial aspect, and refuses to name any definite sum or to formulate any concrete demand.

While courteous and accommodating to a degree in all that

concerns the purely artistic side of the work demanded of him, he shows himself adamant in his refusal to dabble with "filthy lucre."

He has the air of saying: "*I implore you to leave this revolting and painful discussion to our secretaries; let us rather reach an agreement with regard to the rest. You will see that money will never cause dissension between us!*"

And the business man (quite enraptured) leaves the Poet exclaiming jubilantly: "What a man! What an artist! What affability! What finesse! What delicacy!"

But next morning the tune has changed.

How often have I seen publishers, newspaper and magazine editors, impresarios, lift imploring eyes to heaven, invoke precedents, turn pale, and fidget uncomfortably in their chairs when faced by an implacable ultimatum regarding a fixed sum—always a considerable one—which the Poet claims as a return for his literary exertions.

"But it is impossible . . . you must be reasonable." "Such a sum has never been paid since writers came into existence . . . Rostand, Anatole France, Tolstoi, Kipling . . . are satisfied with less."

My answer never varied. "Well, and why do you not go to them? Did D'Annunzio send for you? Did he ask you anything? If you like his conditions, accept them; if not—good-bye."

"This is no serious business; but proceed with the negotiations," the great American editor Hearst once cabled to his agent in Paris, in answer to the latter's telegraphic complaint that D'Annunzio, through his secretary, daily doubled the amount agreed upon the previous day.

I can assure you that if all the penniless poets and unfortunate business men, all the authors, who have endured hours of humiliating suspense hanging about editorial or theatrical waiting-rooms, could only know what tribulations their flint-hearted, cold-blooded tyrants endured at the hands of D'Annunzio, they would club together and erect a monument to his memory at least as tall as the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour.

* * * * *

I have said elsewhere, and not without reason, that while D'Annunzio has great talent for judging the individual, he has also a very deep understanding of the passions, the psychology, and the weaknesses of human nature as a whole.

In the domain of affairs he employs to admirable advantage this special knowledge, due to his constant and acute sense of self-preservation.

When, during our stay in France, he had important dealings with any Italian, German or Spaniard, he rarely omitted to remind me: "*Don't write, do not bind yourself to anything by correspondence. Make him come to Paris.*"

He believed, and events confirmed this belief, that when in Paris, far from his own business milieu, the newcomer to the capital, thrown off his guard and inebriated by the tumultuous, immoral and diverting life of the metropolis, would see everything *en grand*, as the French say. Although he might be austere in his own home, he would be led into some escapade, some slight folly, or even some passing conjugal infidelity, all of which, combined with the luxurious and suggestive Parisian background, would tend to make him wax in our hands. Between a lunch at the Bois de Boulogne and an evening spent with pretty ladies in a night club, he might show himself disposed to grant various concessions which he would have deemed impossible in his offices at Milan, Rome, Dresden or Madrid.

* * * * *

Up to now we have spoken of business matters connected with D'Annunzio's intellectual activities. Let us now deal with them from another angle.

Gabriele D'Annunzio—but few knew of this—very nearly became an industrialist through a contemplated partnership with the famous Parisian perfumer, Lenthéric, with the object of exploiting a certain product, the *Acqua Nuntia*.

What was this famous *Acqua Nuntia*, a perfume coveted by all the snobbish ladies of Italy and France, which D'Annunzio used as a sort of love philtre whenever he embarked upon a new adventure? It was a perfume famous in all the elegant world between 1900 and 1910?

According to the Poet's version, which I can confirm from

direct sources, it owed its origin to a fourteenth-century formula discovered by him in an ancient manuscript dealing with unguents and perfumes, which, by the way, I never set eyes upon. However, I did see a recipe in D'Annunzio's handwriting, but when I proposed to make a copy of it he took it jestingly out of my hands, saying that it was a secret one.

The fact remains that during that period of his life which coincides more or less with his residence at the Capponcina, he always kept large and small phials of Murano glass, which he filled with his favourite essence and adorned with special cards bearing the inscription *Acqua Nuntia*. As well as making copious use of the perfume for his personal needs, he liked to present it to ladies of his acquaintance.

The only authentic *Acqua Nuntia*—that is to say, the one which the Poet at that time pretended to prepare himself—was in reality distilled by a trusted chemist in Florence according to his prescription. Though mingled with other aromas, it had a perfume in which incense predominated. I vaguely recall it as a cross between Houbigant's *Chypre* and Rosine's *Nuit de Chine*.

He negotiated simultaneously with an Italian firm which had approached him, and with Lenthéric in Paris, who was to have launched this scent. Given D'Annunzio's celebrity, the business should have turned out a very profitable one for everyone concerned.

However, for various reasons—the chief one being, as usual, D'Annunzio's shilly-shallying and his exorbitant demands—the deal fell through.

On the other hand, D'Annunzio cannot be blamed for refusing to be treated like those poor inventors who are forced to abandon the fruit of their patents to the firms who exploit them. It was only too natural that, in view of the inevitable disadvantages of such publicity, he should have tried to obtain definite advantages to compensate him for it.

His innocent obsession for seeking industrial outlets and his indulgence in personal craftsmanship, initiated with the projected launching of the *Acqua Nuntia*, never gave the Poet peace for long. It was to be diverted into various channels, reaching its height at the Vittoriale, on an occasion of which I

shall speak in another chapter. One day he took it into his head to devise a special wheel for motor-cars, and embarked on calculations and designs, but after consultation with an expert, to whom he submitted his drawings, he reluctantly abandoned it.

* * * * *

In this chapter I must mention the *affaire Delguzzo*. It is not my intention to dwell in detail on all the changes of fortune of that queer Italo-American, whom the imaginative Poet dubbed after their first meeting the "tenacious colonist."

The two men met in 1910 at the Hôtel Brun at Bologna, at a tragic moment (from a financial point of view) in D'Annunzio's life. The Capponcina had entered on its agony, and there seemed no remedy in the world potent enough to save it. Too many debts (800,000 lire at that time corresponded to five or six millions of to-day) had piled up, and D'Annunzio's despairing creditors refused to give him further credit.

Signor Delguzzo, an Italian, for many years a resident of Brazil, fell a ready victim to the charm of the adventurous Poet, and rightly supposing him to be threatened with difficulties and humiliation owing to his lack of money, allowed himself to be carried away by a generous impulse. However, while listening to the dictates of his heart, the former emigrant did not lose sight of the possibility of killing two birds with one stone—that is, of saving the Poet and thereby going down to posterity as a new Mæcenas and of being at the same time the means of filling D'Annunzio's pockets with golden coins, while not forgetting his own.

Therefore, without any circumlocution, he invited the Poet to undertake a series of lectures in Latin America, offering to finance the undertaking himself.

After this interview D'Annunzio and the Italian parted on excellent terms, and the Poet presented to the future benefactor one of his books, *Forse che sì, forse che no*, with the jesting inscription: "*To the Messiah, who was invoked and appeared, to Giovanni del Guzzo, with a hosanna.—Gabriele D'Annunzio.*"

A little later the Poet signed the contract, or, according to his own words, "*confirmed the pact of alliance,*" and Delguzzo forthwith paid into his account an initial sum of fifteen thousand

lire, followed at short intervals by supplementary payments.

But it was written in the Book of Destiny that D'Annunzio was not to cross the Atlantic.

Did he waver because indecision was one of his most characteristic traits, or because the making of a decision inspired him with a terror only comparable to that displayed by the criminal within sight of the guillotine, or did he merely hesitate because he feared that this undertaking was not of a sufficiently serious character to ensure an unqualified success?

Probably there was something of the kind at the back of D'Annunzio's mind. As a result of these cogitations, instead of sailing for the New World, he modestly departed for France, where he remained for five years!

A few months later Delguzzo launched his Catilinian denunciations. The public smiled, and having already heard so many things about the Poet, took little notice of his offences against the "tenacious colonist." Thus the matter was allowed to lapse.

Two years later Delguzzo, who had, so to speak, morally sheathed the sword, visited the Poet in Paris. It was there that I met him, but D'Annunzio, with his customary *savoir-faire*, assumed the rôle of a magnanimous judge and *forgave* the Italian, who had paid him for services never rendered.

I have no knowledge of the further developments of this imbroglio.

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This was not the only occasion on which the Poet was approached with the intent of luring him to America, for a series of lectures.

Out of dozens of proposals—some of which were discussed and then abandoned, and others uncompromisingly refused—I shall mention, because of its originality, one which came from the U.S.A. The American manager had foreseen and prepared for any and every contingency, so that, without any hesitation whatever, he proposed that while an American lecturer read from the podium, D'Annunzio should recline at ease in a box, offering himself at the same time to the gaze of an ecstatic public.

This sedentary occupation was to bring him fifty thousand lire for each performance, and the draft of the contract provided that these *sittings* should be repeated at least fifty times.

If the intermediary sent over to submit this original proposal failed in his chief objective, he certainly provided D'Annunzio with quite a week's amusement. Before leaving again for America the agent solemnly declared to me that he was happy to have made the acquaintance of the "most extravagant man in the world."

While D'Annunzio, with his intuition and cunning, has always known when to elude or to refuse outright business proposals unlikely to advance his interests, he has lost, by his indolence and indecision, some golden opportunities of money-making. The reader will find the strongest proof of this assertion in my chapter "D'Annunzio and the Cinema."

* * * * *

The most extravagant proposals, at times genuine, at times bogus, to be accepted or rejected according to his humour, have been made to D'Annunzio. "*The foolish*," he once said to me, "*are fluttering around me like moths around a lantern*." This was perfectly true.

Among the numerous genuine proposals I shall relate of one in particular, not only because it illustrates the esteem in which D'Annunzio has always been held, but also because it gave rise to a curious episode.

Whilst we were in Paris in 1910, D'Annunzio received, at the Hôtel Meurice, an invitation to meet the President of the Brazilian Republic, or rather the newly elected President, Hermes da Fonseca. The latter was to take over his exalted duties one month later, and was in the meantime staying in Paris at the Hôtel Mercédès, prior to his departure for Brazil.

D'Annunzio, naturally, directed me to get into touch with the President's secretary and to fix with him the day and hour most convenient to the foremost citizen of Brazil for the forthcoming meeting.

I went at once to the hotel, and having reached the ante-room

of the apartment occupied by Senhor da Fonseca, I introduced myself as the Poet's secretary.

But now comes the hitch. First the usher, then the secretary, misunderstood me: imagining that I was D'Annunzio himself and giving me no chance of rectifying their error, they projected me into a drawing-room, where I found myself face to face with the illustrious President Fonseca. No sooner had I crossed the threshold than he got up and came towards me, held out his hands, and, acting under the same misapprehension, uttered gracious words of welcome in broken French.

There is no need to wonder at this. In the eyes of modern Sovereigns and Heads of State a great artist ranks level with themselves; they look upon him as a sort of spiritual colleague, and do not consider it a lack of prestige to treat him as an equal. Did not Charles V bow in admiration before the brush of Titian?

The trouble lay in the fact that I was *not* D'Annunzio, but merely his unworthy representative. What was I to do in such a dilemma?

My first impulse was, of course, to clear up the misunderstanding, but while I was screwing up my courage for the task the President, who was surrounded by various distinguished Brazilians, turned towards them, and definitely and irremediably sealed my false identity by saying: "I present to you the greatest of poets, Gabriele D'Annunzio."

Realising that to provide an explanation at this juncture would only cover us with ridicule, I commended myself to Divine Providence, and bravely determined to impersonate Gabriele D'Annunzio, if only for a few moments.

Under these false colours I was invited to pay Brazil the honour of a visit—and under what splendid conditions!

The new President assured me that he would place at my disposal nothing less than the cruiser *Minas Geraes*, then lying at anchor in the port of Lisbon.

I overflowed with expressions of gratitude and devotion; but I am convinced that President da Fonseca and his suite carried away with them the impression that Gabriele D'Annunzio was a very affable gentleman, but afflicted with a shyness bordering on stupidity.

Finally I was allowed to take my leave, and returned safe and

sound to the Hôtel Meurice, where I recounted my wonderful adventure to D'Annunzio.

He listened with amusement to my tale, and expressed his approval of the line of conduct forced upon me by circumstances. "After all," he said, "in a way you stood proxy for me in what amounts to a marriage. If I am ever obliged to figure in the affair myself, I shall get out of the difficulty by saying that I have grown a beard."

But fate was against him this time also, and he was unable to accept this courteous and flattering invitation. The journey to Brazil was therefore postponed *sine die*, like the one, so often projected and discussed, to the United States. It may be stated here that D'Annunzio has never shown any special enthusiasm for the idea of crossing the ocean—so little, in fact, that one day, receiving an offer even more fabulous than its predecessors, he expressed his views on the subject in the following words: "This business would be good enough but for the confounded condition of going to America."

* * * * *

Though of a disinterested and even prodigal nature, D'Annunzio is the most lucid and calculating of men when it comes to the defence of his interests. He is quite ready to sacrifice some of his earnings in favour of a friend or of a woman, yet this does not prevent him from always knowing to a penny the amount due to him.

At the time when the French exchange moved in favour of the franc, it was amusing to observe the competence and precision with which he pointed out to me (I was then in Paris) whether it was better at any given moment to demand payment in lire or in francs.

He wrote in November, 1916:

"Dear Tom,—With regard to the exchange, I had the opportunity of consulting P. P., who is a remarkable expert in such matters, and he assured me that the accounts were erroneous. Moreover, the Italian money sent to Arcachon at the time was reckoned by the exchange at the rate of 16½ per cent.

"It is, however, probable that the Parisian Stock Exchange is more arbitrary in its methods than others.

"Gold moves between 1.30 and 1.35.

"It would be desirable another time to obtain as much as possible."

And in December he returned to the attack:

"I wired to you concerning the exchange because it is only right to take one's just profits in these particularly hard times; perhaps it will be more profitable next time to send registered treasury notes.

"The exchange stands at 118.50 for one hundred francs.

"Therefore, on the 20,000 shown as remaining after all expenses have been paid, the difference will amount almost to 3600 lire. Bear this in mind."

Who, reading these letters, would imagine that they were penned by a very great poet?

While I have truthfully asserted in a foregoing chapter that D'Annunzio is, in principle, hostile to all that smacks of speculation, this does not apply to affairs which, though not bearing directly on his work, yet owed their inception and development to parallel pursuits in which he excels.

For instance, he has been approached on various occasions with a request to examine certain doubtful works of art for the purpose of settling their authenticity. He has never refused such requests, but, on the other hand, would not undertake this task unless I could secure for him a fee commensurate with appreciation of the object's value, which might be expected to follow his pronouncement that it was authentic.

Such negotiation took place over a certain picture attributed to Titian, and also over a reproduction in wax of a horse, which, according to its owner, was that undiscovered and famous horse of Leonardo, well known to all art chroniclers.

The possessor of this supposed masterpiece wrote to the Poet on the 27th of March, 1914, as follows:

"Most illustrious Signor D'Annunzio,—

"Although I have changed my hotel, your letter reached me safely. It is natural that, before beginning your investigation, you should consider it opportune to come to a definite agreement, and in conformity with your wishes, I shall be happy to receive your secretary, Tom Antongini, at the Hôtel de Bade.

"I quite recognise that it will be well to decide on a method of research before starting. I fully realise how difficult your

investigation will be, how great your responsibility because of the absence of valid documents. Moreover, as I am guided by the highest motives and am a slave to duty, I repeat and maintain that the object under examination is a guaranteed antique and comes from the family whose letters are in your possession. Will you, illustrious Signore, accept, and so forth . . .”

D'Annunzio sent this letter to my house, adding the following words: *“Dear Tom, I have received this letter from F. Tell me frankly whether your own affairs allow you to take this up. I want neither to lose the opportunity if it is a good one, nor the time if it is impossible to come to an advantageous arrangement.*

“I have already explained the situation to you. Try to make an appointment for to-day, deal dexterously with this matter, and do not keep too rigidly to definite figures.

“I would like the sum to be fixed at twenty-five thousand lire, as follows—sixteen thousand on the signing of the contract, ten thousand on completion of the work, five thousand on the day of publication, and royalties on sale prices.

“I shall remain at home until two o'clock. Au revoir.—Gabriele.”

It is certain that the wax horse would have fetched a high price had D'Annunzio declared it genuine, the more so as he intended to publish a brief monograph, followed by a précis of his findings.

On several occasions the owner brought D'Annunzio the pseudo-Leonardo so that he might examine it at leisure. At times he remained for hours in the ante-room, refusing to be parted from his treasure.

But after having patiently and minutely examined both the exhibit and the documents pertaining thereto, D'Annunzio felt that he was not in a position to pronounce a definite opinion, and for this reason finally abandoned the project.

At more or less the same period a picture attributed to Titian came to him from Paris, through a lawyer in Milan who was a friend of mine. It represented a nude baby reposing on a cushion of crimson brocade. The owner possessed an almost complete “pedigree” of that work of art, referred to in various monographs on Titian, without giving, however, precise indications concerning its origin.

Unlike the questionable *Horse of Leonardo*, the picture attributed to Titian struck D'Annunzio forcibly, and he expressed the desire to keep it and study it for a month at least. He ended by persuading himself, almost, if not quite, that it was genuine, but, having caught influenza, he had to stay in bed, and was unable to make any pronouncement on the subject.

The pseudo-Titian, after remaining in the safe deposit of the Crédit Lyonnais until 1921, was taken back to Milan by its owner.

In more recent times, while he was staying in Rome, D'Annunzio was several times requested to inspect, from purely artistic motives, a *Leda*, also ascribed to Leonardo, which belonged to a private collection, and to give his opinion on it. Marshal Caviglia himself accompanied him on this expedition, and, full of enthusiasm, expressed his conviction that the masterpiece was genuine, a conviction, however, unshared by D'Annunzio.

This once more tends to prove that he is never tempted by the human lust for riches to commit himself to a verdict of which his conscience did not approve; it also displays in a singularly favourable light that fundamental rectitude which has been so often subjected to the most violent and unjustified attacks on the part of the public, and in defence of which I have broken many a lance.

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Sometimes his business instinct mingles rather amusingly with that vein of humour so typical of his disposition.

Once in 1921, when he was already installed at Gardone and I was attending to his business in Milan, where, at my instigation, he had deposited in a bank a certain sum for current expenses, he sent me a cheque for five hundred lire, in order that I might settle some small debt.

As I was staying at the Grand Hotel, I endorsed it in the name of the hotel proprietor, Signor Zaccheo, who cashed it for me without demur.

Shortly afterwards he said to me: "I warn you that the cheque signed by D'Annunzio will never be presented for payment."

"And why?"

"Because," he answered, "I showed it to a foreigner who was here on a short visit. He implored me to give it to him and paid me its full value, saying that he was only too happy to keep such a precious and curious autograph of the great poet in his possession."

A few days later I reported this to D'Annunzio. He smiled, remained silent for a few moments and then said musingly: "*A very practical idea has suddenly occurred to me: suppose I gave you a considerable number of cheques for the amount of one hundred and two hundred lire, to carry about with you on the chance of meeting a collector? Don't you think that he might cash them for you and keep them afterwards as autographs?*"

"*Therefore my deposit account would remain unaltered, while a large number of happy simpletons wandered round the world. What do you say? And why did you not think of it yourself?*"

He summed up laughingly: "*It seems incredible that it should take a poet to devise such a scheme.*"

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I also wish to establish that D'Annunzio adds to the countless facets of his many-sided personality a pellucid sense of reality and an ever-vigilant circumspection regarding his material interests. I truly believe that I can achieve my object without in any way lowering the spiritual plane which he occupies in the minds of all thinking and intelligent people.

But if his unsuspected qualities as a business man have been directed into various channels, in none has he manifested his gifts more splendidly than in the domain of journalism.

It is not my intention to hold forth upon the quality of his numerous and successive contributions to Italian newspapers, to catalogue their numbers, or to expatiate on the variety of their subjects (notes, criticisms, dialogues, short stories, sports chronicles, social and feminine gossip columns, etc.).

This fascinating study has already been undertaken, and will, no doubt, be followed up by further investigation in a field as promising as it is fertile.

My own purpose is to define the motives of D'Annunzio's journalistic activities and to examine whether they were inspired by a genuine journalistic mentality or merely were the outcome

of circumstance, also to establish up to what point he succeeded in exploiting the situation to his financial advantage when he became the most highly paid journalist in the world.

Nevertheless—there is no doubt about it—D'Annunzio has always lacked the true spirit and the real mentality of the journalist.

When he wrote articles in newspapers, it was always because he was pressed for money, and never from inclination for or love of this work. However highly paid, the writing of newspaper articles always irked him. From Cagnacco, where in 1920 (as I shall relate further on) he took up journalism once more, he wrote to me in Milan: *"To-morrow I shall be in a position to send you the fourth article. I work like a dog, squeezed dry by misery."*

One of the chief journalistic attributes must be a gift of improvisation, a quality which D'Annunzio totally lacks. He is the first to admit this. In February 1915, in reply to an offer of advantageous terms if he would write and deliver an article for a French newspaper within three days, he sent me an express letter from Arcachon, saying:

"This improvisation is, as you know, quite beyond me, I am not even trying."

And on a similar occasion: *"With all the good will in the world, I have as yet been unable to send you the brilliant morceau."*

Finally (even more uncompromisingly) he wrote, in 1921, in answer to a proposal which I transmitted to him with regard to a collaboration abroad: *"You know how repugnant journalism is to me. Therefore I feel disinclined to undertake such a task. I cannot be a newspaper correspondent, not even a special or a humorous one. Besides, I have set my heart on producing books again."*

True, even in this domain he has known how to make up for his deficiencies by his immense talent and extraordinary facility for adaptation. Besides, even when quite a novice in the newspaper world, he made his mark to such an extent as to fill with admiration an expert like Scarfoglio, who was blessed with all the typical qualities of the star-journalist and cursed with all his defects.

The beginnings of D'Annunzio were so modest that they were positively innocuous.

At the time when he made his bow to the public, the man who

was one day to refuse 50,000 lire for a column and a half in a newspaper was often content with a box of sweets, or with a credit amounting in all to ten or fifteen lire opened for him with a florist of the capital. He never completely abandoned the payment in kind, and always derived much amusement from it. During the Capponcina period we are able to record a greyhound accepted in payment for an article in a review, and in 1920 he offered M. Coty (though only in jest) articles intended for the *Figaro* in exchange for cases of perfume. I hasten to add that Coty immediately sent him the desired cases without awaiting the articles promised by his friend the Poet.

That he should have accepted this original form of payment during this first year in Rome should cause no surprise. It is to that period that he alluded later in voicing his conviction that a poet's most beautiful coronet of glory is formed by the arms of lovely women. He added, somewhat whimsically, that their hands have other uses: for the lack of money, they were willing to clutch at flowers or sweets.

Moreover, D'Annunzio has never allowed discussions with regard to his proposals. "*Take it or leave it*" has always been his motto.

The editor Sommaruga, not only had a notable flair for discovering dormant genius, but also the gift of revealing it to the public; and Gabriele D'Annunzio, for his part, was at that remote time already too conscious of the future possibilities held out to him by his talent to refuse to accept sacrifices which he considered merely transitory.

In fact, after the briefest of intervals, from credits opened with the pastrycook and the florist we come to payments of a less fleeting character, though they remain still very modest—some twenty lire per article.

The journalistic profession, at a time when he was actually trying to earn a living (between 1884 and 1887), merely provided him with the bare necessities of life, throwing in as an after-thought some social amenities which did not amount to a great deal. So much for the material aspect.

With regard to the moral side, the compensations which offset his labours in the literary field were far more substantial, especially for a man as passionately and insatiably addicted to

women as D'Annunzio. His daily column gave him the chance of extolling the most beautiful women of Rome and of receiving from them the recompense which he most desired.

But to discover in D'Annunzio something more than the journalist whose pen at times earned him fifty lire or a feminine caress, we must bridge a gap of twenty-three years; for he gave up writing for the Roman press as far back as 1888.

It was towards the end of 1911 that he began to contribute regularly to the *Corriere della Sera*, the great Italian newspaper then directed by Luigi Albertini. The connection began in an unpremeditated fashion, with some patriotic songs which D'Annunzio subsequently collected in his volume known as *Canzoni della Gesta d'Oltremare*.

These are the first sparks of that great patriotic fire which was to blaze up in his heart at the beginning of the European conflagration, and to last all through the war and the Fiume occupation, up to the very day of his retirement to Cargnacco.

These songs were paid for by the *Corriere della Sera* at the rate of 2,000 lire each. It was not a very large fee, even for those times, but at least it gave the lie to the old adage, "*Carmina non dant panem*."

Luigi Albertini was an excellent administrator; and your good administrator belongs, by tradition and in the strictest sense of the word, to the order *paterfamilias*. D'Annunzio found little cause for merriment in their association, for advance payments were taboo, and never was the traditional "pound of flesh" more pitilessly exacted than were the literary contributions from the poet.

D'Annunzio wired to me one day in May, 1913, from Arcachon: "*Knowing Albertini's meticulous methods consider prudent to finish Leda to-day otherwise we run the risk of waiting goodness knows how long for our money.*"

Worse still: Albertini, indulged himself by sermonising D'Annunzio. Thus the Editor of the *Corriere della Sera* was thereafter in a position to boast that he had played the part of the Poet's fourth preceptor, the first having been his tutor at the Collegio Ciccognini, the second, Emilio Treves, and the third, Marco Praga.

When his *Cycle of Songs* was finished (for even the most

beautiful things must come to an end) the now famous *Faville*, at one thousand lire each, came into their own. The *Faville* achieved, in time, the position of a monetary standard in D'Annunzio's consciousness as well as in his conversation. He used to ask me, jokingly at first, but later on with the utmost seriousness: "*What do you think is the price of that piece of furniture that we have seen at Groult's? Do you suppose that he will let me have it for a couple of Faville?*" exactly as he would have said, had he been a Brazilian, "for a pair of *contos*."

He also invented an apposite verb, *sfavillare*, which he frequently used in his letters. He wrote to me at Arcachon at a moment of particular financial stress: "*I have had to work day and night to meet the end of the year bills! Alas! the final remedy is 'sfavillare'! I am alone, alone, and in the deepest melancholy. I am getting old.*"

And in March of the same year he wrote to me: "*Unfortunately the 50,000 lire of the Pisanella will all go to feed the creditors. To think that all this money is of no earthly use to me!*"

"*Now, no sooner have I completed this tremendous task (more than four thousand verses) than I shall have to begin to 'sfavillare' all over again. What a sad fate! I embrace you.—Your Gabriele.*"

After this the process known as *sfavillamento* was given a long rest. D'Annunzio was labouring at works on a more ambitious scale, and at the moment when he could have once more renewed his connection with the *Corriere della Sera* he made the acquaintance of Hearst in Paris, or rather, of his representative there, Signor Bertelli. Naturally, the *Corriere della Sera* did not measure itself against a competitor of the calibre of the famous "boss" of the American Press.

Hearst wanted to secure D'Annunzio as a contributor to his seventeen daily newspapers, and saw his ambition realised, but although he began by paying D'Annunzio 2,500 lire for each of his articles in 1914, he had to increase the rate to 25,000 in 1920.

Once only, Hearst's agent tried, between 1914 and 1921-22, to obtain a reduction in his terms from D'Annunzio, whereupon for some time the Poet did not deliver a single article. Then, probably finding himself in a difficult situation, he remembered that old source of revenue and wrote to me:

"*I forgot to tell you that it will be necessary to revert to my old*

arrangements with Bertelli. This would stimulate me to write more often."

He ended with the following reflections on contemporary economic conditions in America: "*There is no economic crisis in America; even war brought prosperity overseas. America's exports have multiplied by five. Business is flourishing. There is no justification for the niggardliness of which I am the victim.*"

(It should be noted that Hearst's agent had merely asked for a reduction.)

Hearst and D'Annunzio met in Paris when the Poet's collaboration had been in full swing for some months. The great American journalist was astounded to find himself lunching at the Pavillon d'Armenonville, where the first interview was to take place, not as he had probably imagined with a gentleman who was the embodiment of the traditional poet, but with a perfect man of the world, turned out according to the canons of Savile Row, and, moreover, astute as a Wall Street stockbroker.

Besides, neither of them mentioned the word business during that joyful repast. The settlement of material considerations was left to their representatives, Signor Bertelli and myself, who battled in friendly fashion, yet always reached a settlement satisfactory to our "chiefs."

Once I had to exert myself more than usual, when D'Annunzio, not so much from distrust as simply to avoid subsequent discussions about the topics chosen for his articles, took it into his head to sell his journalistic products in a sealed envelope, the buyer having no knowledge of either subject or contents: the fee had to be paid and the article blindly accepted on his sole assurance that the envelope contained a hitherto unpublished article of about three thousand words on a theme unlikely to wound Anglo-Saxon susceptibilities, written entirely in D'Annunzio's hand.

This time Signor Bertelli, confounded by such new and unexpected demands, considered it his duty to wire to New York before submitting to these unheard-of conditions. And Hearst, a perfect psychologist, if ever there was one, and moreover a competent business man, rather than lose D'Annunzio, accepted his latest whim.

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During the first period of the war, while D'Annunzio was still in Paris, his output for the Hearst newspaper group (the only American papers to which he has ever contributed) somewhat slowed down. Conversely, he published a few articles in the French papers, but for the most part from patriotic motives, without hoping for a penny in return. Besides, the Parisian editors, who to this day pay their "Academicians" 300 or 500 francs at the most, would probably not have exerted themselves in order to give more to Gabriele D'Annunzio. It was, therefore, better for the Poet to accept nothing at all than to lower his high standard of fees.

But the Editors of French newspapers, though their bourgeois mentality resisted superfluous expenditure, yet realised full well the inexpediency of publishing anything for which they did not pay, especially in the case of so famous an author as D'Annunzio.

Towards the end of October, 1914, D'Annunzio decided to contribute once more to the American papers, but in a manner quite novel for him. He expressed the desire to act as a duly accredited war correspondent. Hearst's agent took care not to refuse so welcome a proposal, especially at a time when such world-shattering events were taking place, a proposal, moreover, likely to gladden the heart of any editor.

But the terms of the contract which subsequently reached the Poet from New York, he turned over to me with a comment written entirely in his own hand, which tended to modify the contract completely and laid down a new basis for negotiation. Here are the various clauses:

"Monsieur D'Annunzio cannot be a mere correspondent. He represents such a combination of ideals that they must be taken into consideration. It is the first time that he has accepted such an offer.

"He must be given a free hand, even in waging war.

"Conditions: 80,000, of which 30,000 on the signature of the contract, and 20,000 on his return from the campaign. 3,000 for every article of about 1,000 words. All his expenses to be paid, including a valet and a secretary (hotels, horses, equipment).

"A minimum of four articles per week."

The Americans held to their own point of view, and the contract did not materialise.

It was only in 1921, when he had already retired to Garda, that the connection was once more renewed. The articles were paid for at the rate of one thousand or one thousand two hundred dollars each—that is, about 25,000 lire at the then current rate of exchange.

At times I took them myself to Paris; more frequently they were telegraphed in Italian from Milan, translated in Paris into English by Hearst's agent, and thence cabled to New York.

D'Annunzio wrote to me at Milan: *"To-morrow morning I shall have my fourth article returned to me by typist of Cargnacco. All you have to do is to telegraph it with the utmost care and precision. As you see, I am an occidental replica of Mark Twain."*

These transmissions, with their attendant and inevitable delays, considering the temperament of an artist such as D'Annunzio, gave rise to endless wires sent from Paris by the unfortunate agent, who was being harried from America yet could not obtain the expected articles within the requisite time-limit.

Amidst all this D'Annunzio remained smiling and unperturbed. All he did was to write to me: *"Bertelli sends me a wire of 500 words. It is obvious that he has burnt candles at the Lady of Bluff."*

D'Annunzio trembled each time at the thought of the "unmerited outrages" to which his prose was subjected as it sped along the wires, with the additional bogey of translation and setting up in print! His fears were not without foundation, the more so as he himself greatly facilitated the making of blunders, if he did not actually provoke them himself, by the use of such uncommon words that the Parisian translator was at his wits' end in his search for the corresponding English expressions. I remember, in this connection, that I once pointed out to D'Annunzio some of these words whose meaning remained "a closed book" to others. D'Annunzio permitted me to modify them to the best of my ability, and to replace them by others of a more current and comprehensible usage for the sake of the employees of the telegraph office, as well as for the hapless translator in Paris. Some words were absolutely untranslatable, apart from the fact that in one of the articles written for the Hearst group he invented an entirely unknown animal, the

"*cameleopardo*." The poor translator telegraphed urgently: "What is this camel-leopard? Please wire."

The Poet, to whom I at once telephoned (I was at Milan and he at Garda), instead of giving me the required explanation, burst out laughing. And, in the translation, the Americans were obliged to place "*cameleopardo*" between inverted commas, leaving the readers to form their own conclusions with regard to that strange beast.

This, however, did not prevent a ludicrous occurrence, which I consider unique in the history of journalism. As more than thirteen years have passed since then and it is unlikely to give offence to anyone, I am now able to disclose it.

In spite of the contract signed between D'Annunzio and the *New York American*, which laid upon him the obligation of sending only unpublished articles, D'Annunzio one day, hard pressed by daily telegraphic reminders, having only finished two articles out of the three that were required, added to these a third one which had appeared a few months earlier in the *Corriere della Sera*, merely changing its title and slightly altering the text.

It was published in the *New York American* a few days later, but the text had suffered such alterations in the course of the various stages of its transmission that a week afterwards the *Corriere della Sera*, failing to recognise in it its own offspring, republished it as entirely new matter of supreme interest.

D'Annunzio, whose attention I drew to this happening, derived immense enjoyment from reading the new Italian version, but refused to follow up the adventure and to adopt my proposal of sending it once more to America to see what would be the outcome of a third translation and of a new transatlantic voyage.

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Certainly (the reader must be convinced of it by now) D'Annunzio possessed a certain *commercial spirit*, and he has always exhibited it when it could bolster up his intellectual gifts. He has given numerous examples of this quality in his business relations with his various publishers, to which we shall return later.

As I have mentioned, he has always shown himself alert and able in defending his interests.

One day, for instance, at Arcachon, having received a case of books ordered by him and which contained an invoice, he sent me the following letter, written entirely by himself, to be recopied and signed by me, protesting against the price, which he considered excessive: "*Sir, in the absence of Gabriele D'Annunzio I have delayed claiming the case of books which you have sent, as, frankly speaking, it was my intention to ask him to cancel the order.*"

"I take the liberty of expressing my astonishment that an Italian writer placing an order of such importance should not be accorded the usual reduction on the retail price."

When D'Annunzio empowered me to discuss the terms of some special business matter, he never omitted to leave in my hands a signed letter, so worded that it was possible for me to produce the magic document at the right moment. One day, in fact, he wrote to me in Paris, where he had sent me to discuss the Russian translation rights with the publisher Mamontoff: "*I add this as a postscript so that you may be able to show the letter if necessary. Don't talk too much. Study your man.*"

And he not only possesses a commercial sense, but even goes to the extreme of reproaching others for lacking that quality. In 1905, when I was his publisher in Milan, he wrote to me from the Capponcina, reproaching me with not conforming sufficiently to American methods in launching a review, which my firm was publishing and to which he was a contributor: "*Why don't you 'hustle' your review? Take an example from TOT.*"*

Could anyone be more of a business man?

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* A well-known Italian remedy for dyspepsia.

CHAPTER XXV

D'ANNUNZIO, WORLD WAR HERO

Moments of anguish—A Cassandra to whom no one listened—A triumphal voyage—Delights of Capua—The curriculum vitæ of a hero—A curious question of Ludwig's—D'Annunzio and the Marshal de Turenne—"France! France! without you the world would be alone!"—"Let us fight and persevere!"

IN a previous chapter I have pointed out that to draw a parallel between the exile of Gabriele D'Annunzio and that of other illustrious men who came before him, such as Dante or Mazzini, would be to wrong shamefully the memory of these men.

I can make the same remark with reference to that period which preceded his return. There, again, the parallel does not hold good. D'Annunzio had retained no contact with those who had remained in Italy and were striving for the same ideal. Consequently, there was not, between their position and his, the slightest analogy. He was active in no political movement and he gave no directions.

D'Annunzio has never possessed either the nature or the mentality of a conspirator. He has shown, whenever he has been called upon to do so, that he is capable of being a great spiritual leader, but he has never managed, either openly or secretly, to place himself at the head of a real political party.

To be an effective leader does not consist simply in knowing how to command, but in knowing how to submit personally to the discipline, to the obligations and to the restrictions which one imposes on one's followers. But D'Annunzio—poet by divine right, exasperated individualist by temperament, rebel to the slightest yoke by inveterate habit—would be unable to impose the least restriction on his fancy, on his pleasure or on the exercise of his art.

That period which runs from August, 1914—the outbreak of the European conflagration—to May, 1915—the date of Italy's entry into the war—was for him, who was living hours of solitary

torment, hopes and disillusionments in France, a period of splendid isolation.

He had finally convinced himself that Italy absolutely did not want to hear any talk of war and that, as a consequence, all his gestures, all his acts, all his writings were condemned to failure in advance.

Those who, from time to time, brought him, from Italy, news of a sort of latent and widespread agitation and who cited as an example the campaigns of a part of the Italian Press which was favourable to intervention, received scant attention from D'Annunzio. Likewise, he avoided contacts with eminent Frenchmen because they would have forced him to admit that he was powerless to create in his native land an opinion of any importance which would approve the project of war.

When unforeseen circumstances obliged him to enter into conferences such as he often had with Barrès (some of which were almost dramatic), he limited himself to making vague promises, founded, for the most part, on the habitual considerations of the affinity of race and of historic necessities.

But, personally, he only half believed in the strength of these ties! Italy, which he had not seen for four years, was, in his estimation, in a state of mind analogous to that of Spain—that is to say, contented to transact profitable business and to remain well removed from the scene of hostilities.

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This was precisely his attitude when, in the beginning of April, 1915, some friends came from Italy to inform him that the Government had decided to invite him to Quarto to pronounce the official discourse on the occasion of the inauguration of the monument to Garibaldi.

An insufficient knowledge of D'Annunzio would have to be presumed to imagine that such a communication would have sufficed to alter his ideas or to fill him with enthusiasm.

For too many years he had been preaching, like a Cassandra to whom no one listened, the inevitable necessity of a war between Austria and Italy. At the time of the Italo-Turkish conflict he had written to me: "*The events only give force to my argument with the friends of Austria. Who lives will see. Italy is*

alone. Woe to her if she is not strong!"

How could he have believed in the good intentions and, above all, in the ability to make decisions of the men who were in power in Italy?

Nevertheless, some days later, the official invitation arrived. It emanated from the Municipality of Genoa, but it had evidently been approved of by the Government.

In the interval—that is to say, at the end of April—Italy had signed secretly with the Allies the Pact of London, by the terms of which she agreed to enter the war against the hostile coalition on the 24th of May at the latest.

The result was this paradoxical situation: on the one hand, D'Annunzio was preparing to make a veritable appeal for war from the heights of Quarto (the while trembling in his heart lest the Government should try to stifle the echo), on the other, a Government, having officially decided to intervene, was beginning to hesitate in the face of disapproving forces and was counting on D'Annunzio as the only man capable of combating the cleverly distributed propaganda of the anti-interventionists.

Assuredly, when, on the 3rd of May, 1915, D'Annunzio boarded the train in the Gare de Lyon which was to take him to Genoa, if anyone had told him that he would only return to France in the course of his flight to Epernay, he would have smiled at so singular a prediction.

A few days before his departure he had declared to me: *"You will see that my speech from Quarto will be considered as a beautiful bit of literature. There will be any amount of applause and there will be banquets which will terminate in the drinking of countless toasts. And quiet having been restored, we will sail back again to France."*

However, the voyage from Paris to Genoa caused him to alter his views considerably. From the moment he passed the frontier, and particularly on his arrival at the station in Turin, the dense crowd which surrounded and acclaimed him showed him to what extent Italy was animated by a new wave of patriotism.

The reception at Genoa convinced him, in the most decisive manner, that the vast majority of Italians was already morally on the side of France and awaited only the signal to hurl itself into the gigantic fray.

In that same station from which, four years earlier, D'Annunzio, more a fugitive than an exile, had departed, accompanied by a single servant and quite unnoticed by the throng, an incalculable multitude welcomed him as a saviour and acclaimed him frantically, while singing songs of war.

He was followed by thousands to the Hôtel du Parc, where he had reserved rooms.

The next day, standing at the foot of the monument, he pronounced his celebrated discourse. He was heard by representatives from every nook and corner of Italy. The Poet was borne aloft in triumph. The popular manifestation took on an aspect so imposing and so enthusiastic that D'Annunzio thought the cause was gained. So strong was his conviction that he decided to leave on the following day for the Abruzzi, to embrace his mother, whom he had not seen for five years.

As a matter of fact, the struggle was only commencing: the news which he received from Rome was anything but reassuring.

The neutrals, with Giolitti at their head and with the German Ambassador in their shadow, had scented the danger and had immediately taken their precautions. At any price, the powerful voice of D'Annunzio must be silenced.

Old Giolitti, incapable by temperament of appreciating the ascendancy of a poet, had nevertheless come to realise that idealistic values have also their weight with the destiny of peoples. He judged his presence indispensable in Rome, and precipitately left Piedmont where he was working.

On their side, the interventionists saw that it was extremely fortunate for them that D'Annunzio was in Italy, for he was the only man who could fight, with any hope of success, against the old and wily politician and his followers. One of the interventionists, who had come to Genoa to receive the Poet, now dashed to Rome. "This faithful friend of D'Annunzio," writes Jean Carrère, who was an eye-witness of the episode, "sent the following telegram from Rome to Tom Antongini, the Poet's secretary: 'Expect you for dinner nine o'clock Wednesday evening—numerous friends will meet train.' The secretary's reply read: 'Accept—count on finding you at station with some friends.' And 'some' friends were waiting for them—more than eighty thousand!"

So writes Jean Carrère and without exaggeration, for the feverish mass of humanity which surrounded the Poet on our arrival was so demonstrative that I was afraid that he would be trampled on or suffocated. He only managed to escape by actual flight to the Hôtel Regina, which he entered by the kitchen door, which, fortunately, was too narrow to give access to the delirious crowd; and, a few minutes later, Gabriel D'Annunzio, in response to the clamours of the multitude, appeared alone on his balcony!

"Never," Carrère tells us, "have I seen an orator advance before the depths of the public with such composure. Standing on his improvised tribune, he was magnificently alone, of a marble pallor, with two eyes of flame.

He had prepared his speech almost entirely in advance. Nevertheless, from time to time, when the crowd made a deafening din, he took advantage of the pause to compose an additional line or two. When he said that Italy was no longer a *pension de famille* or a museum or a garden for honeymoons, but a living nation, the storm of applause lasted several minutes. The storm was transformed into a cyclone when that voice, more vibrant than ever, pronounced these famous words: "*There is the stench of treason in the air and that treason is taking place right here in Rome. We are on the point of being sold like vile cattle.*" "No! No!" roared the crowd. "That shall not be! Death to the traitors!"

In the Boncompagni Palace, across the way, the Queen-Mother of Italy, Marguerite of Savoy, hidden behind the shutters, listened and wept.

From that moment, interventionism spread over Italy like an epidemic. Italy's entry into the war was no longer decided by the Government and the Pact of London, but by the entire country. The session of Parliament and the speeches which the Poet made at the Capitol and in the Costanzi Theatre were only so many corollaries of the decisive words which D'Annunzio had pronounced from the balcony of the Hôtel Regina.

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From the 24th May, the date of Italy's entry into the war, until the day he departed for the front, D'Annunzio lived in a sort of

social parenthesis. I have not employed the adjective "social" because I am fond of contrasts. The Poet's existence for at least five weeks ceased to be that of an animator and a future combatant and became that of a man of the world who goes from a reception to a dinner and from an intimate tea to an even more intimate night.

An observer might have thought that this war, which he had desired, patronised and heralded, had lost its interest for him. He was, of course, constantly in contact with the officials of the Government and particularly with the representatives of the Minister of War, but he appeared to follow the events rather as a spectator than as an actor.

This man, who, a month later, was to live only for Italy and for the struggle and for the victory, and who was to consecrate to these ideals four years of his life with the most perfect heroism and the most complete abnegation, seemed, during this short period, to sink into the most abject state of frivolity.

He surrounded himself with long-forgotten friends. He dined with them at the Villa Borghese or at the Castello dei Cesari. He received and gave teas at the Hôtel Regina.

I am bound to say, in his defence, that his military status had not yet been determined; and, in his praise, I add that he had given the commanding General Cadorna distinctly to understand that he would not accept honorary posts.

Nevertheless, one fact will always remain mysterious and inexplicable for me. Never did he manifest the slightest need of a little reflection and mental preparation for the totally new existence upon which he was about to embark!

It is true that he was impatient to be ordered to the front, but in the meantime he amused himself and spent his strength daily on amorous adventures, made continually more facile by the glorious halo which he had worn since his return to Italy.

It was as if his taste for all the games of passion had been excited by the period of waiting which he was forced to endure before he could enter into the war, the greatest of all games.

But, as I have said, these delights of Capua only lasted a few weeks. Then, one fine day—the 14th July, 1915, to be exact—not because of any new determining fact but simply by one of those sudden changes of which his life offers us a thousand

examples, and which seem to have been dictated far more by destiny than by desire, Gabriele D'Annunzio donned his lieutenant's uniform, and departed for the front.

* * * * *

I profoundly trust that there exists no one who still questions the fact that D'Annunzio fought in the war, and that he fought seriously from his first contact with the enemy—that is to say, from the 7th of August, 1915, when he flew over Trieste, until the Christmas of Blood in Fiume, in December, 1920.

For five years his attitude astonished everyone: it surprised his detractors, who had considered him an upstart; it surprised the ministers, who considered him as an animator of the old school, a sort of national bard, capable at the most of spurring the living to action and of celebrating the dead; it astonished his friends, who knew the enormous importance he attached to bodily comfort; it confounded his fellow-writers, who have never forgiven him for having availed himself of so unexpected a form of publicity, and it astounded thousands of good people, who could not understand how a man over fifty, already famous, could find amusement in risking his life every day.

Never has a poet—I am speaking of poets of D'Annunzio's intellectual rank—pushed heroism, the love of country and self-abnegation so far.

We are told that Sophocles took part in the battle of Plataea but, particularly, that he danced the pæan naked after the victory. His merit, then, appears to be rather æsthetic than military. We know that Cervantes was wounded in the battle of Lepanto on a galley of the Pope's and that Dante was present at Campaldino. Chénier fought at Valmy; Camoens lost an eye (like D'Annunzio) while campaigning in Africa; Foscolo received a bayonet wound in the thigh in the attack of Cento. But when all is said and done, apart from Byron, who died for Greece at Missolonghi (and not on the field of battle), no one has done what Gabriele D'Annunzio did.

Although he was fifty-two, he fought on land, on sea and in the air, and risked his life continuously. For five years he surpassed himself. His contempt for death was so constant that it no longer even seemed sublime.

When he presented himself before his soldiers, they acclaimed him. At the attack of the Veliki, an infantryman seized him by the arm and said: "You are Gabriele D'Annunzio! Stay where you are!" "*Why I rather than you?*" the Poet asked. "Because, if you are killed, who will make another like you?" He was the soul of the war for those about him.

On the 7th August, 1915, he accomplished his first audacious flight. In the capacity of observer, he flew over Trieste. In the course of the first flight, he dropped a message and during the second, he bombed the artillery arsenal of the city.

On the 19th August he joined an Adriatic expedition on board a torpedo boat and on the 28th of August again flew over Trieste. In September he flew over Trento and was violently shelled by enemy artillery. In the same year he joined the infantry in the battle of San Michele and in December, 1915, and January, 1916, he carried out a series of daring raids over the enemy lines.

On the 23rd February, 1916, he lost the sight of one eye in an accident in the course of a reconnaissance flight. After seven months of treatment, he defied the doctors' orders and returned to duty at the front.

On the 13th September, 1916, he made an air raid on Parenzo and in October of the same year passed days and nights with the soldiers, participating with the infantry in attacks on enemy positions.

He covered himself with glory when the Veliki was taken.

In January, 1917, he took part in the tenth battle of the Isonzo and in May in that of the Timavo. In August he bombed the naval base of Pola and in October he joined the dangerous aerial invasion of the port of Cattaro, returning to the trenches in December.

In February, 1918, with thirty men—among them Ciano and Rizzo—he accomplished at sea the *coup de main* of Buccari and in June he rejoined the Air Force, bombarding and attacking with machine guns the enemy during the Austrian offensive on the Piave. On the 9th August he organised and led the famous flight over Vienna and on the 26th September, having gone to France, he flew over the Aisne and dropped messages into

the Italian lines. In October he joined the infantry in the last battle of the Piave.

Victory crowned his heroism and his devotion to his country.

He received the gold medal for courage in the field—the highest decoration which can be given an Italian combatant for war merit.

A year later he carried out the glorious expedition into Fiume. The King conferred on him the title of Prince of Montenevoso.

Others will write with more precision on the subject of this extraordinary "*curriculum vitæ militaris*." What particularly interests us here is to know his opinion of war and, above all, to learn how he managed to adapt himself to a life so totally different from the one he had always led.

At the outset, we must eliminate all his public manifestations, with the exception of those which coincide with the statements of an intimate and confidential character which are at our disposal. Naturally, no matter how grave they may be, a chief never publicly reveals his doubts and apprehensions.

Despite his age, D'Annunzio acclimatised himself surprisingly quickly to his new existence. This was rendered comparatively simple for him by the fact that, from the first, he was considered and treated as a completely exceptional combatant, and this is greatly to the credit and honour of our generals, Cadorna in particular.

The General-in-Chief immediately perceived that the formidable moral force which D'Annunzio represented for the country and for the army would be, if not lost, at least diminished, were he to be utilised in the body of the hierarchy and of the military organisations. Thanks to this intelligent conception on the part of the supreme commander, D'Annunzio, who had started the war as a lieutenant of cavalry, was permitted to be an aviator, an infantryman, a sailor and an organiser of expeditions, to which he invariably gave a distinctly personal complexion.

The Army and the Navy tacitly approved this special case, unique among all the nations which participated in the war, for the excellent reason that no other nation possessed a Gabriele D'Annunzio. Immediately after the flight over Vienna the *Arbeiter Zeitung* published the following: "And our D'Annunzios, where are they? We are not lacking in a number of men who recited emphatic verses at the beginning of the war,

but who among them has had the courage to do what Gabriele D'Annunzio has done?"

It is furthermore certain that, although a combatant in every sense of the word, he was forced to submit to very few physical privations, apart from those which a man of his age must necessarily accept if he is to live the life of a young man.

And so, during all this long period, his sufferings were, for the most part, moral. They were generally occasioned by suspensions of military action—suspensions which he could not be expected to understand, for he did not possess all the elements which determine them. His mentality was similar to that of those civilians who, having read the war bulletins, were astounded at the time it took to operate, and promptly put the generals down as incompetent.

He was never really happy unless he was allowed to act. He wrote to me, under the date of 8th September, 1915: "*On the 20th September I shall undertake the most dangerous of my flights. May luck be with me! Life is a dreadful bore without the fever of war. And this war will last till infinity.*" In another letter, written at about the same time, he said: "*Action trains me. I have passed some exciting hours, but all the rest strikes me as being extremely mediocre.*" In October, 1915, he wrote: "*I fly and wander about beneath the shrapnel, but I am invulnerable*"; and he concluded with irony: "*Just the same, life will not be worth the living if the Germans take Constantinople.*"

At this point I consider it necessary to mention an incident which may seem useless to certain readers (those who were able to follow personally the Poet's activities during the war). However, since a recent conversation which I have had with Emil Ludwig, the biographer of Napoleon, I am convinced of its importance.

We were talking of D'Annunzio. Without warning (Ludwig always takes advantage of a moment when his listener appears tired to put, with apparent indifference, the question which most interests him), he asked me: "Is D'Annunzio truly a courageous man?"

"Is he courageous?" I imagine that my tone must have resembled that of Primo Carnera's mother when she was asked if her son was really strong.

"If I ask the question, which evidently impresses you as completely idiotic," Ludwig explained quickly, "it is because I have heard some doubt cast upon his courage by men who followed the Poet closely during the war."

"D'Annunzio," I told Ludwig, who asked nothing better than to believe me, "is not a man who thought himself obliged to disdain danger simply because he wore a uniform. He has never known the meaning of fear!"

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It does not signify for a single second that one does not possess courage even though one's physical, and even more one's æsthetic, soundness is unused to meet fear. D'Annunzio has been imbued with a sort of fear since his adolescence. He has always endeavoured to avoid quarrels with the brutes with which the world is full to overflowing when it has not been necessary and when it has not been a case of protecting someone unable to defend himself. But whenever to have avoided conflict would have been, if not cowardly, at least a proof of non-combativeness, he has not hesitated for an instant. I have often been a spectator and an ally in circumstances of this kind.

One evening in Arcachon (I have chosen this little incident from many others which date back before the war) he went out alone to confront a Russian vagabond who had been loitering around the villa and who was suspected of having maltreated one of the dogs. The Russian was a veritable colossus in comparison to D'Annunzio and there was nothing reassuring in his aspect. But D'Annunzio took him to task in violent terms without bothering to ask himself whether or not the man was armed, and when the Russian made as if to raise his arm, D'Annunzio hit him such a blow in the stomach with his fist that the intruder judged it prudent to decamp.

Another time, at Berne—and this was many years ago, when we were descending toward the Aar for reasons which the good people of Berne will excuse in two young men such as we were in those days—we encountered three individuals who barred our passage, insulted us and finally set upon us. By a happy chance, I found myself face to face with the most drunken of the three and had little trouble in disposing of him. But when I turned to help

D'Annunzio, he had already routed the other two aggressors, who had certainly not imagined that such a frail man could be possessed of such vitality and pugnacity.

Allow me to add to these two episodes, of small importance but none the less significant, the duels of D'Annunzio, in which he has always comported himself as a man ignorant of fear. Furthermore, his careless and courageous attitude in the midst of the pestilence of Fiume was the occasion of wonder to all who saw him. We are forced, then, to conclude that his contempt for danger during the war was not the result—as in the case of the French Marshal de Turenne—of a marvellous victory of the mind and will over the body, but the result of a constant quality which demanded nothing more than favourable opportunities to manifest itself in an impressive fashion.

"Life for me is only a game put off from one day to the next and delicious in consequence. I frequently fly over the enemy three or four times in twenty-four hours! Before long, big things are going to happen here also."

That is what D'Annunzio wrote to me in June, 1918, when he had already lived through three years of war! And certainly he was not seeking to astonish me by giving me new proofs of his smiling indifference to danger when I had witnessed so many examples of greater or lesser importance in the course of long years of life at his side.

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Very different from many people (and I am not speaking only of civilians!) who, in every country, followed the vicissitudes of the war from a purely national point of view and who were prevented by a supreme indifference from taking into consideration the repercussion which the victories and the defeats of the Allies were bound to have on their own front, D'Annunzio always regarded the war as a united effort for a common goal. Long before the united front, so admirable in theory and so difficult to apply in practice, became an actuality, he had conceived of it as the ideal system of operation. He was at all times well posted on the situation all along the battle line, particularly in France.

His interest is also explainable for two reasons of a sentimental nature. For one thing, he had been an eye-witness of the

immense sacrifices and of the supreme heroism of France during first ten months of the war; for another, he had always been the (and has since remained) a fervent friend of France from the standpoint of wit and culture.

"*France! France! without you the world would be alone!*" I consider that the Poet has conveyed his sentiments magnificently in these words.

During the bloody days of Verdun, D'Annunzio, who was with me in Venice on a short leave of absence, passed his days and nights between his house and the newspaper offices, so anxious was he to obtain the latest information.

But his anguish for the French attained its highest pitch when France, after having been saved by the "miracle of the Marne," towards the end of the war was again and even more gravely threatened. Never—unless during the days which followed Caporetto—have I seen D'Annunzio so troubled and upset as at the time of the disastrous defeat at the Chemin des Dames.

He wrote to me: "*I cannot describe my emotion and my admiration as I regard the spectacle of France at this desperate time. I have not slept for two nights. I have not been able to look at food for two days. My anguish takes my breath away. I would so like to go to France in command of a squadron of my Capronis.*"

This letter bears the date of June 3rd, 1918, when the Germans had reached the forest of Villers-Cotterets.

Nevertheless, D'Annunzio's love for France, which has been sometimes called a weakness in Italy, did not prevent him from recognising some of the faults of the French Government with regard to Italy and, above all, those of *Docteur Clemenceau* (this was his pet name for the illustrious "Tiger"), who was to pronounce, later on, at the Peace Conference, the following unfortunate phrase for which the Poet has never forgiven him: "*Fiume c'est la lune!*"

He stated his opinion in a little book of polemics on the lack of comprehension of the "sister nation." The book was published by Grasset in 1919, and bore the title, *Confessions of the Ungrateful One*.

I was in Paris in the capacity of secretary of the naval section of the Italian Delegation at the Peace Congress when he sent me the manuscript of the book.

D'Annunzio desired that his work should appear in the columns of a French newspaper before being published in volume form, and he sent me a barrage of letters and telegrams in the hope that I would be able to arrange the matter for him.

But despite all my efforts and the help which I received from Marcel Boulanger and Achille Richard, two French writers who were sincere friends of Italy, it proved impossible to carry out D'Annunzio's wishes. Although their sympathy for the great Italian Poet was profound, the French newspapers refused to assume, at so delicate a political moment, such a grave responsibility, for any one of them to have voiced the vindications of Italy, splendidly expressed though they were by the pen of D'Annunzio, would have been to take an open stand against Clemenceau. This was too much to expect.

Confronted with these difficulties, D'Annunzio was so enraged that, for the first time in his life, he reproached me unjustly, contending that I had failed to defend his interests adequately. Afterwards he acknowledged his mistake.

Confessions of the Ungrateful One appeared only a month later in book form and gave rise to no objection. The old "Tiger," after sixty years of journalism, was well aware of the difference, from the standpoint of arousing public comment, between an article read by thousands of people the same day and a volume on sale in the book stores.

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Unlike so many others—I might say the vast majority—D'Annunzio almost never stopped to consider what would happen after the war. Only in a letter which he addressed to me toward the end of 1918, and in which we see the complete D'Annunzio with his congenital hesitation, his patriotic love and his indescribable thirst for adventure, do I find a confidential allusion to the problem of Italy's and his own personal future.

"What will Italian life be after the war? Will that state of uneasiness which caused me to exile myself continue? If I survive—I don't particularly wish to—what shall I do here? Another war? I am always ready to fight, but not with treacherous weapons. The subject is too vast and too arduous.

"For the time being, let us fight and persevere!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE POET'S UNHAPPY EDITORS

Dante with respect to editors—An audacious Poet—The exacting dandy—D'Annunzio versus a humanist—The parthian arrow—An editor, grand seigneur—The battle between D'Annunzio and Treves—The Poet "firts" with Mondadori—The incomparable printer—The prestidigitator—The Punishment of Paris—A Prudent Editor.

IF there happen to be sitting, in the ante-chamber of a publishing house, a grotesque being who smiles persistently at the door-keeper, it is a safe wager that the individual is a poet.

In the eyes of no matter what editor, a poet is a weird specimen who, with a complete absence of common sense, persists in producing unsaleable merchandise or, at the very best, something which can attain no commercial value before both the author and the editor are dead and buried. If the statement of this fact reduces the poet to tears, it leaves the editor absolutely indifferent. And the latter is not entirely to blame.

When, in 1318, Dante had finished his Comedy, the divine poem, for an editor—presuming that such a man existed—it would have held but mediocre interest. At the very outside, he would have sold five or six hundred copies, and those to families or for whose good reputation, he had transported them to Paradise. Doubtless the editor would have reproached Dante for the very special character of his work, and Dante, with the charming personality for which he is known, would have promptly sent the editor to the Devil.

When Gabriele D'Annunzio appeared on the horizon, like an unexpected comet, the attitude of Italian editors with regard to poets was anything but favourable.

The new "æde" seemed to submit, like the others, to the secular tradition. Nevertheless, he had, as early as 1880, some fundamental and extremely personal theories as to the relations between authors and editors. In a letter to a certain Pieraccioli

de Prato, D'Annunzio, then seventeen and practically unknown, declared: "*You will have the opportunity of selling 250 new copies of my Primo Vere, in addition to the fifty you have already received on deposit and for which you will kindly send me a receipt.*" It is clear that, in this distant day, his confidence in the honesty of editors was somewhat limited. On his arrival in Rome, where, if we are to believe the austere philosopher, Benedetto Croce, "what dominated was the thirst for pleasure and luxury and the acquaintance of those who had learned to live by the love of sport and the sport of love," Gabriele D'Annunzio, who was not as yet entirely sure of himself, accepted, from his then editor, payment in the form of boxes of candy and small florists' bills. In the same way and at the same time, Scarfoglio accepted a pair of worn boots and Carducci fifty lire for a poem! D'Annunzio considered he had made a masterful deal the day he extorted from his publisher a pair of opera glasses in return for some pages which were destined, unknown to him, to immortality.

After all, did not Milton accept five guineas for *Paradise Lost*?

But not many months had slipped by before the Poet began to show his claws. Another Italian editor, Signor Barbera, who directed a house over a hundred years old, received this from the young puppy from the Abruzzi:

"Matilde Serao speaks extremely well of you!"

But it was with the house of Treves in Milan that there commenced the battle, courteous and implacable at the same time, which was to endure for nearly half a century. In 1885, when he was twenty-two, D'Annunzio dared to write to Emilio Treves: "*For the poetry I want 4,000 lire; concession for five years.*" True, Treves promptly replied that he refused to do business with a man who suggested such innovations, but the Poet declared: "*You must take me as I am or leave me.*"

What poet, prior to D'Annunzio, would have presumed to ask his editor, not for an artistic edition but for a presentable edition without coming forward with the amount of money necessary for the paper and the printing? What novelist, intoxicated with a few successes, would have demanded, in 1885, more than ten per cent royalties? What author, even celebrated, would have calmly insisted upon controlling the sales?

Nevertheless, all these dreams became, quickly enough, tangible realities for D'Annunzio. In 1921 this same D'Annunzio, in writing to me on the subject of a Russian editor who was making him offers which were too attractive and, therefore, in his eyes, suspicious, summed up his opinion in these convincing terms: "*Editors should be watched continually!*"

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From the outset, D'Annunzio presented himself to Treves not only as an author who was well aware of the commercial value of his works but, above all, as a celebrated champion of elegance and eccentricity. The two brothers Treves, Giuseppe and Emilio, knew to a penny the price of a cravat, a bottle of champagne and a hotel bedroom and bath with a sitting-room attached. They were bewildered by this refined little man who ordered a dozen suits of clothes at a time, who invariably served Mumm's *Cordon Rouge* to his guests and who ordered fresh-cut flowers every day in his hotel.

D'Annunzio kept telling them: "*Since I spend a great deal, I must earn a great deal*"; and in the course of an interview he affirmed: "*In my opinion, it is the editor's duty to surround with comfort and favourable warmth the conception and the birth of a work of art*"—an admirable programme on which D'Annunzio is in perfect accord with Balzac. But what a difference as to results! One day he wrote to Treves: "*Apparently you are not aware that I have become a very precious writer, and not only as to style.*"

With similarly amiable sophisms and with equally captious reasonings, presented with that intellectual charm to which the Treves brothers, could not remain insensible, in a year's time D'Annunzio had so completely conquered his editors, and particularly Giuseppe, then manager of the concern, that the latter not only conceded all the demands of his original protégé but even adopted the habit of always carrying in his vest pocket D'Annunzio's last business letter, in the same way that an amorous young man carries the picture of his best-beloved. He admitted this so candidly and produced the letter so willingly that the Poet wrote to him: "*You have a mania for eternal bonds. You remind me of a discarded mistress!*"

Thus, from ordinary editions, they progressed to editions on

de luxe paper. And from a few timid typographical embellishments they arrived at special decorations for each page and for each heading. The traditional pasteboard bindings were replaced by authentic parchment; excellent work which Treves carried out. And this is all-important—a royalty of fifteen per cent became twenty per cent, twenty became twenty-five per cent and twenty-five became thirty per cent. Emilio Treves never spoke of these figures without raising his eyes to Heaven to bear witness to this prodigy.

When Treves was D'Annunzio's guest at Arcachon, in the course of a meal at which we three were present, I mentioned the time when, I, myself the Poet's publisher, had paid him thirty-five per cent. Emilio Treves, who considered himself the father of all editors, looked at me with commiseration and, clapping me on the shoulder, said: "Quite so, and two years later you didn't have a penny left!"

But the percentage victory was not the only one D'Annunzio achieved. For example, he made the advance a customary clause in a literary contract and he carried the system to a height of untold splendour. We all know that the publisher's advance to the author is a sum of money paid over before any profits have been realised, and consequently is deducted from future royalties. This holds good for all of us, but not for Gabriele D'Annunzio.

For this great financial arbiter, the advance has always been, and always will be, susceptible to increases, but it has no relation whatever to future payments, which, according to him, are intangible and sacred!

The editor Olsky of Florence, whom D'Annunzio describes in one of his books as a "*princely editor amongst the most powerful, as well by his culture and by his fortune,*" was subjected to an amusing consequence of the Poet's editorial-financial conceptions. D'Annunzio had agreed to send him a preface for a new and limited edition of the *Divine Comedy*. We were then living at Versailles. On the signing of the contract, Olsky had paid 5,000 lire, the understood price of the short preface. In 1911, 5,000 lire was a very respectable sum of money and more than many excellent authors made from a novel of five hundred pages. From Florence, Olsky wrote frequently for his preface, and D'Annunzio

waited for the clouds to blow over and did not even bother to set to work. Finally, tired of expostulating in vain, the editor came to Paris and addressed to the Poet, in Versailles, a letter which did not conceal his indignation and in which he employed the word "nonsense." D'Annunzio read it, smiled, meditated and finally sent this telegram: "*Smoky wrath is not becoming to serene humanist.*"

Happily, the humanist remained serene in the face of the editor. Olsky calmed down and waited patiently. But that is not all. When, at last, the preface was finished—something which was accomplished with difficulty for the Poet wrote to me: "*I am writing with inconceivable effort as if I had the secular commentaries of Dante on my stomach*"—I took it to Olsky at the Hôtel Meurice, but with the formal order to deliver it only if Olsky accepted the following terms, so characteristic of D'Annunzio: "I have brought you the preface, but the Poet has forbidden me to hand it over to you gratis. Kindly be good enough to pay another 5,000 lire. You understand, of course, that D'Annunzio, having spent the first 5,000 for urgent necessities while he was writing, feels that he should receive something now that the work is done." Olsky stared at me as if he had not grasped one word of my speech. Then he glanced at the manuscript, sighed profoundly and signed a second cheque for 5,000 lire.

I took it to D'Annunzio. Can you imagine what he said as he placed it in his wallet? "*People can say anything they please of Olsky, but when it comes to business it must be admitted that he never fails to conduct himself quite correctly.*"

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When Giuseppe Treves died, D'Annunzio's dealings with the publishing house necessarily fell to the surviving brother, Emilio. The latter was, beyond a doubt, a sound and honest man of affairs. In the course of their association D'Annunzio received by way of presents from Emilio Treves, a bicycle in 1897 and a bouquet of cyclamens. "*Why the so virginal gift?*" the Poet wrote.

When we were in the Landes the Poet, having received a letter from his old editor in which he announced his intention of

paying him a visit, wrote: "*My dear Emilio, I cannot begin to tell you what pleasure this unexpected news gives me. I am to see you here, in my humble house and you are to share my frugal repasts?*" (I have rarely eaten so sumptuously as at Arcachon.) "*When are you coming? I have wired you to know the exact date. I will meet you at Bordeaux or I will send Antongini to meet you. How long do you expect to stay? The air here is miraculous. It will make a new man of you! I am not going to make this a long letter, because I want to tell you everything in detail when you get here. My dear Emilio, I beg you, come without fail. Do not change your mind! The voyage from Aix is not as fatiguing as you may imagine. Until soon, your Gabriele.*"

Emilio Treves arrived and D'Annunzio put him up at the hotel in Moulleau, only a short distance from the villa. During the week that Treves spent in Arcachon the Poet's manner was cordial, fraternal, affectionate. He promised his publisher some new works and he flattered all his pet ideas. And never once did he mention money! This astounded Treves so much—particularly as he had received from the Poet but a short time before a letter which said among other things: "*Here, all the shrubs in the forest are laden with gold, but I am not*"—that on the evening of his departure for Italy he took my arm and said confidentially: "You have no idea how happy I am to have seen Gabriele again. He has changed so much for the better. Don't you think so?"

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If D'Annunzio had found in the person of Emilio Treves a friend generous with advice but sparing of money, he discovered in Gaston Calmann-Lévy not only a faithful friend but a *grand seigneur*. With the exception of the latter, William Heinemann of London is the only foreign publisher with whom D'Annunzio's relations were always cordial and friendly.

Whenever the Poet required financial assistance, or guarantees to enable him to obtain it elsewhere, he found Calmann-Lévy ready to grant him what he wished. Only on one occasion did I see this editor slightly taken aback, and that was when, in 1911, I asked him, on behalf of D'Annunzio, for an advance of 100,000 francs. In 1911, 100,000 francs was a small fortune

and represented appreciably more than half a million francs to-day. However, Calmann-Lévy acquiesced.

Of course, in each instance where the advance was considerable, Calmann-Lévy tied D'Annunzio with a prolongation of contracts—an ancient and honourable system which has always permitted publishers to hold their authors “until death do us part,” and thereafter. But he never moralised, and the Poet was extremely grateful on that account.

The house of Calmann-Lévy is perhaps the only one which has never driven the Poet temporarily mad because of errors in the proofs. D'Annunzio had only one fault to find with them, and it was more a source of amusement than anything else: Calmann-Lévy's proof-readers, who were excessively zealous, corrected his French verse. They had a way of modifying certain phrases where they found archaic or uncommon French expressions and they thought, of course, that they had done the Poet a great service.

If I have employed the word “perhaps” above, it is because D'Annunzio wrote me one day furiously denouncing some editor or other for the errors in his proofs, and he said: “*I cannot accuse either you or Govone of such editorial uncleanness.*” The Count Giuseppe Govone is an Italian editor established in Paris. He was a Legionary at Fiume and D'Annunzio not only considers him as a friend but appreciates his infallible good taste. He writes of Govone: “*He seems to continue to-day the tradition of those patricians who knew how to alternate the rigours of war with the elegances of peace.*”

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Despite controversies and matters of lesser importance, it was only in 1920, when D'Annunzio returned from Fiume, that the rupture between the Poet and the old house of Treves became definite and official. Faithful to his methods, the while publishing with Treves the volume which bears the title of *Nocturne*, the Poet had already begun to “flirt” with a new editor who, by his intelligence and perseverance, had risen very rapidly and who, for several years already, had been working to get control of the most important literary production of Italy. This was Arnoldo Mondadori.

I was the intermediary of this new editorial union of D'Annunzio, of which the apogee was to consist of the publication of all the works of the Poet in the form of a great national edition. The "marriage" was celebrated.

Arnoldo Mondadori, although a business man awake to every trick of the trade, did not escape D'Annunzio's charm, and that charm has always had as a consequence, as far as editors are concerned at least, the granting of those terrible advances which the Poet demands habitually with peremptory letters. All his previous editors had been forced to submit to this tyranny. It was normal that Mondadori, whom the Poet baptized "Montedoro" (Mountain of Gold), should follow in the path of his predecessors. He, too, soon became accustomed to letters of this sort: "*Oh, Poetry, divine liberty! It is essential that I be not annoyed with presumptuous and vain solicitations.*"

But Arnoldo Mondadori was not a man to be so easily discouraged! He not only desired but he knew how to be worthy of the qualifications which D'Annunzio attributed to him in one of his dedications: "*Incomparable printer and very faithful friend.*"

On the 21st July, 1927, the Poet, overjoyed at the receipt of the first volume of the collection which to-day is magnificently completed, wrote this to Benito Mussolini:

"*I had announced to you the completion of the first volume of the Complete Works for the solstice of summer to which is consecrated the divine book of Alcyon.*"

"*I announce to you to-day gaudium magnum. The volume is now in my hands, which tremble with happiness.*"

"*It seems to me to surpass in purity and beauty the finest copies of Jean-Baptiste Bodoni.*"

"*I feel certain that, when you can look at it, you will be glad that you linked your name with this severe enterprise of Italian printers.*"

"*Alcyon repeats in the solstice for us both the motto of Giovio: 'We, we know well the times! Nobis sunt tempora nota.'*"

"*I embrace you.*"

"21—VI—1927, Gabriele D'Annunzio."

I am sure that no editor in the world has received such a recompense since the art of printing has existed. I am equally sure that no editor has ever received from any author a letter such

as the following, which D'Annunzio addressed to Mondadori, who had prepared and sent for signature the receipt for a million lire which he had paid the Poet twenty-four hours before: "*I have not been able to sign the receipt which, on stamped paper, appears so barbarous and ambiguous. Return it to me. Here are three lire for having profaned the stamp with such insolence.—Gabriele D'Annunzio.*" Mondadori promptly framed this curious document, along with the three historic lire.

We see that even the receipt of a million lire in cash failed to blind the æsthetic senses of the Poet and took nothing from his deliciously original humour, which has never ceased to sustain him through his miraculous existence.

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I am not going to weary my readers with an enumeration of those works which D'Annunzio has imagined and even promised, and which he has not only never sent to his editors but has never even set about writing. Nevertheless, I consider it important to point out that these works, of which there are a great number, are a further proof of his incomparable illusionary gift. It should not be forgotten that each of these projects has developed into a promise to an editor, and has been authenticated by numerous letters in which he speaks of the work as if it were all but finished. In this last regard, D'Annunzio is quite sincere, for he is capable of carrying in his head an entire book in such detail that there literally remains nothing more to do than to put the words in black and white.

For instance, in September of 1910 he wrote to Treves: "*I am preparing for Pierre Laffitte's great journal Excelsior a series of Confessions and Inventions and, when I have finished this work, I shall start on Amarante.*"

Long ago he likewise announced a book of *Countrysides and Profiles*. He also announced a play called *The Hunted God*. After *Francesca da Rimini*, he announced another tragedy entitled *Sigismond Malatesta*. In 1908 he promised Treves a *Life of Jesus*. In France he promised Madame Simone a play called *The Hatchet*, and quite recently he has mentioned frequently a forthcoming novel, to be known as *Flesh without Flesh*, of which he said to me a few months ago: "*It is going to be a cruel but a*

true piece of introspection. There will be obscene passages. It is the spiritualisation of the flesh." Has he written a part of it?—I really believe so. Will he ever finish it?—Who lives will see.

Gazing at the long list of titles of D'Annunzio's non-existent works, most of which I have spared my readers, I get the impression that they are not so much the dreams of a poet as the tricks of a prestidigitator who, instead of producing two miles of ribbon, twenty bunches of flowers and a live rabbit from the complaisant spectator's silk hat, prepares for his audience quantities of pleasant combinations of words. What is unfortunate in this case is that the spectators are editors, and that, as a consequence, they are not greatly entertained by the Poet's illusionary talents.

D'Annunzio has had his little joke on every editor without exception. But where his cleverness attained the maximum of virtuosity was in the instance of an editor whom I would gladly leave in his obscurity did not my determination to produce an integral documentation oblige me to speak of his brief and painful history. I am alluding to Tom Antongoni, the author of this volume, who knew the glory of being Gabriele D'Annunzio's editor in the years of grace (or disgrace!) 1905 and 1906.

I was a friend of the Poet of many years' standing, and since he had often talked to me, in moments of confidence, of the tragic situation in which he had become involved, I sincerely believed myself the man appointed by Destiny to break his chains.

The required sum should have discouraged any sober-minded editor at the very beginning. But, alas! I had conceived the audacious project of eloping editorially with D'Annunzio, and I promptly executed my plan. The celebrated Poet was soon among the authors boasted of by the publishing house which I had created.

For D'Annunzio—I can say it myself—I was truly an incomparable editor. The dedication on one of the pictures he has given me reads: "*To Tom Antongini, to the friend and to the incomparable editor.*" For two solid years, like a veritable Mæcenas, I never stopped paying out money to him in exchange for nothing. With me, Gabriele D'Annunzio did not limit himself to creating spectres like the second-rate mediums who

work for two hundred lire a séance. He outrivalled Eusapia Paladino; he created ectoplasms.

I saw with my own eyes the manuscripts, stack upon stack of pages, representing the works he had promised me and of which the titles stood out brilliantly on the topmost sheets, and if it never occurred to me to look beyond that first page, perhaps the only one with a word of writing on it, it was not so much because of discretion as because of that strange cowardice which makes the suspicious lover prefer the subtle comfort of doubt to the frightful certitude of treason.

Although he was bound to me by a contract, he did not hesitate, in 1905 (happily I did not know it until much later), to write to Emilio Treves: "*My arrangement with Tom Antongini is strictly limited. There is not a clause which prevents me from giving to you or to anyone else, whenever I please, no matter what book. It amounts to this: I have perpetrated a little treason in your regard: it has the advantage of being golden.*" That adjective!—an allusion to the sums I had handed over to him.

And that is not all. Accusing me of something like voracity when, as a matter of fact, I was starved, he wrote to me on the very same date: "*Your house has numerous volumes to print. You have Amarante and now, unexpectedly, The Mad Mother. I add that I can also give to your house another novel for which I already have the idea and the title.*" To convince me more than ever of the existence of this third work, he went on: "*I am in an ocean of difficulties. I must talk to you. The story, as a result of those brusque and impetuous germinations which are not rare in the history of my mind—it is thus that L'Intrus was born—the news has developed in proportions until it has become, in its lines, a novel.*"

It goes without saying that I never saw either *Amarante* or *The Mad Mother*, or this famous third novel, and when, after thirty years, I permit myself to chide him playfully for his treasons, he replies laughingly: "*He who knows how to simulate knows how to reign!*"

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One evening in January, 1912, at Arcachon, while D'Annunzio was working in his study, a long, loose-jointed man, clad entirely

in black, presented himself at the garden gate. The valet asked him who he was and what he wanted. The visitor replied: "I am the editor Sommaruga and I wish to see Gabriele D'Annunzio."

I received him and, a few minutes later, announced the editor to the poet.

"*Sommaruga?*" D'Annunzio cried. "*Good Lord! Is he still alive?*" (It must not be forgotten that it is the Poet's habit to calmly bury everyone whom he has not seen for a year.)

"Not only is he alive but he looks extremely well."

D'Annunzio received him cordially and asked him what he wanted.

After a moment's hesitation Sommaruga replied: "I have come to make you an offer of a semi-editorial nature."

"Which means exactly?" D'Annunzio was interested.

"The Italian Government has censored some of the verses in your *"Canzone dei Dardanelli."* Now, would you have the patience to copy, *in your own hand*, the suppressed verses in twenty volumes I have brought with me? I am ready to pay you 500 lire a copy. That makes 10,000 lire—which you will have made with very little trouble!" he concluded with his most engaging smile.

Having meditated a little, the Poet replied: "*Very well, I accept. Leave me the twenty volumes, and Antongini will bring them to you completed in a few days.*"

But the few days passed and D'Annunzio, although extremely hard-pressed for money, showed no tendency to set to work. I decided to remind him. He replied: "*You know, it is such a bore for me to write the same thing twenty times that, really, I have not the courage to do it. Tell Sommaruga that he has my permission to copy my handwriting, and that, instead of 10,000, I will be satisfied with 5000 lire.*"

When I submitted this proposition to Sommaruga, he shook his head and said: "Tell him from me that I thank him for the authorisation, but that I went to gaol on his account when I was thirty and I have no desire to repeat the experience at fifty-six. Now I shall never see my twenty volumes again. Oh well, never mind!"

CHAPTER XXVII

DIPLOMATIC INTERMEZZO

The beggars—The "Forgery Office"—General Brussiloff's sword—D'Annunzio and King Nicholas—Zaghlul Pasha's horrible cough—The necklace—"If *Wilson were to go mad!*"—The exile without reprieve—Money that fell from heaven—The remarkable luck of a hotel thief—An Embassy of the Regency—A French diplomat of the old school.

ALL men who approach their fiftieth year are acquainted, if only summarily, with the official history of the long and arduous Peace Conference, which came to a fatal ending after labouring for many months over the treaties of Versailles, Saint-Germain, Neuilly, Trianon and Sèvres, treaties which sowed equal discontent in the minds of the belligerents, the neutrals, the uncivilised peoples—and probably in the minds of the inhabitants of the planet Mars, if any such watched events from afar.

Only a few, including the Parisians and those who were direct participants or onlookers, have any real knowledge of the strange world which was brought into being by the summoning of this great Congress. It was a repetition of the Council of Constance in that it brought together a strange mixture of men of vivid intelligence and of fools, of courageous patriots and of rascally financiers, of irrepressible idealists and of shameless courtesans of every race and species. Chroniclers and historians have estimated that the number of courtesans and women of ill fame who congregated in Constance in 1414 was 30,000. In Paris, though this imposing figure was not reached, several thousand women of various nationalities swelled the local contingent.

At the banquet of the Quai d'Orsay there sat down as honoured guests plenipotentiaries of the greatest nations of the whole world. Every day they conscientiously devoured provinces and cities, annexed lakes, seas and rivers. Outside the door, like beggars, sat the more or less legitimate representatives

of numberless peoples discontented with their fate, and all those others who had followed in their wake from sheer love of novelty; all alike, however, trying to pick up the crumbs dropped from the Pantagruelian board.

Among the pariahs of the Conference were representatives of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, of Ireland, Syria, Egypt, the Ukraine, and so on. Lastly there was a representative of small and distant Fiume, of that town which—unique instance in history—had defied the whole world, only to surrender to a poet, and had, in its turn, been lifted by the mere fact of his presence to the height of an indestructible symbol of liberty.

And the signal honour of representing not so much the town as the symbol had fallen to me.

The Italian Government was at that time in the hands of Francesco Saverio Nitti, whose hair, or what little remained of it, stood on end at the mere mention of Fiume. It is easy to realise what must have been the moral position of an Italian representative of what was regarded as a rebel town, in that Paris where there was already a vigorous, not to say plethoric, representation of official Italy, occupying four floors of a big hotel.

Of the material situation it is better to say nothing, for the high command in the City of Fiume had solved the problem of financing its plenipotentiary—myself—in a very simple fashion: it never sent a penny.

By the way, the troubles and difficulties attending my honourable and arduous mission did not begin in Paris; they started much earlier—in fact, the moment I left Fiume. The envoy of the *Comandante* D'Annunzio leaving a besieged city to go abroad had no chance of evading the attentions of the Italian police installed on the confines of the diminutive city, the more so as the Minister of the Interior in Rome was minutely informed of all that took place in Fiume, especially in the Government Palace. My flight from Fiume (for it was more a flight than a departure) was made possible only by the help of a curious department of the Fiume Government, a department which, in some disguise or other, probably exists in all the countries of the world, but which at Fiume, where sincerity went hand in hand with deceit, revealed its function by the name "Forgery

Office." It was managed with competence and firmness by Lieutenant Riccardo Frassetto, one of the seven specially sworn-in officers who had escorted the Liberator to Ronchi on the night of the 11th September, 1919.

This office, as the name indicates, had for its purpose the falsification of passports and personal documents for the use of the *Comandante's* messengers desirous of travelling to any quarter where their presence might be required in order to uphold political intercourse which the *Comandante* thought in any way useful or helpful to the cause.

For an office organised on such highly modern lines, it was child's play to prepare for me a suitable passport provided with all the necessary visas and other formulas.

I left, therefore, full of faith and hope, sped on my way by the *Comandante* and the Legionaries and carrying with me as talismans, not only the volumes of D'Annunzio's works but a letter from the *Comandante* to His Majesty the King of Montenegro, then an exile in France . . . and the glorious sword of General Brussiloff.

His historic Damascene sword, the property of that famous Cossack general who, in the first year of the great war, lifted all Europe on to a wave of enthusiasm by his invasion of Galicia and which for a moment seriously threatened Austria-Hungary, had reached my hands through no merit of mine, but by the merest accident. Another gallant Russian general, also of Armenian descent—General Torcom—had been obliged, for political reasons, to leave unexpectedly for Paris. In his haste he left behind in the hotel at Fiume, where I too was staying, the glorious souvenir which General Brussiloff had presented to him a few months earlier.

It was precisely that Cossack sword which, at the station of Milan, gave rise to the first of my difficulties.

I had intended to break my journey at that town and to spend two days there, for family reasons, before proceeding to Paris, but a decree of the Prefect of Milan, of which I was of course in ignorance, had at the time forbidden all importation of arms, no matter whether of antique or modern make.

General Brussiloff's showy sword, as might have been expected, at once caught the attention of the representatives of the

Law, and I was forced to present myself before the Station Superintendent to offer the necessary explanations.

This personage listened to me with benevolence, complacently examined the glorious record of the no less glorious general, but decided that to enter the town with that weapon, however innocuous it might be, could not be permitted, and that I must be deprived of it. The Law was the law.

But a little later, touched, perhaps, by my protests and entreaties, he offered to keep the precious relic in his office until my departure for Paris, and this was accordingly done.

In spite of this I had no sooner left the station than I was immediately shadowed by a plain-clothes policeman—an attention usually paid in those days to any trusted emissary of *Comandante D'Annunzio*. But this time chance played a trick on His Excellency Signor Nitti, again through no fault of mine.

Followed by the watchful guardian of the peace, I quietly made my way to the house of my cousin, who lives in the Via Fate bene fratelli, and whose name, like my own, is Antongini. Half an hour later my cousin went out, leaving me in the company of his mother, and the policeman, who was patrolling the street, misled by a certain physical resemblance, hardly surprising in two persons belonging to the same family, and moreover of the same type and age, conscientiously followed at my cousin's heels and thus lost my precious trail for ever.

I should add that my relative was at that time, and probably is still, so indifferent to everything connected with politics that he never opened a newspaper. He would leave the house in the morning, take a short walk to his stables, ride for an hour or so in the park of Milan, and come straight home.

In the afternoon he never went out, save, being a great music-lover, to an occasional but rare concert. At home he never received visitors. Having no reason to change his habits, he naturally continued them during the time that he was being shadowed, so that a few weeks later, the Prefect, who had received all the reports on this sporting and quiet existence, ordered, with the approval of the authorities in Rome, that "surveillance" of this peaceful pseudo-conspirator should be discontinued.

In the meantime I had reached Paris without further adventure. I at once wrote to His Majesty King Nicholas of Montenegro, who was living modestly in a small villa at Neuilly, to beg for an audience, so that I might deliver to him the *Comandante's* letter and report on all his plans for military action in liaison with the glorious and invincible bands of Montenegro.

D'Annunzio's letter to the Sovereign ran as follows.

"Sire,

"I salute you as a soldier and as a poet, from the heights of this armed city.

"The remembrance of your gracious visit to my aviation camp remains alive in my heart, and our cavalry is in close touch with that of your indomitable country.

"Lieutenant Antongini will tell you, Sire, what we will do for justice and liberty.

"Graciously accept, Sire, the assurance of my deepest devotion.

"Gabriele D'Annunzio.

"Fiume d'Italia, 13 October, 1919."

I obtained my interview, but the trend of events had turned the unfortunate Sovereign into an incurable and absolute sceptic.

He was confident that the future would bring justice to his heroic people and to his secular dynasty, but his pellucid political sense forbade him to believe in the possibility of an immediate realisation of his hopes through the D'Annunzian programme. The overbearing attitude towards him of his former brethren, linked to him by race and faith, had lastingly weakened the fibre of the old mountain lion who, for half a century, had held out victoriously against the Sultan of Turkey.

* * * * *

In Paris I had taken rooms in the Rue de Madrid, but though the Fiuman legation was officially domiciled in that street, all its activities were centred in the Café Napolitain, where during all that period there congregated daily, apart from the usual artists and journalists observing an almost century-old tradition, a number of foreigners of uncertain profession and even more uncertain political colour. I am not certain whether these

premises were under police surveillance, but I can bear witness that everyone, unreservedly and without circumlocution, expressed his real political sentiments, without being subjected, as far as I can tell, to any annoyance on the part of the authorities.

One point, however, was soon brought home to me, namely, that my patriotic feelings towards Fiume clashed with those of some of the other visitors, who were unknown to me. Though I was not once invited to call at the *Préfecture de Police*, on the other hand, I received various anonymous letters written in vile French, in which it was suggested that I should cease to display such superabundant enthusiasm for the City of Fiume and for the adventurer who commanded it . . . if I did not wish to receive a lesson that would cure me of it for ever.

But these menaces were confined to letters, and stopped after two months.

Often, real and properly conducted meetings took place between the nationals and representatives of the numerous "oppressed" nationalities. These plenipotentiary sittings were usually convened in the private residence of some one of the members, and it often gave me satisfaction, as establishing the victory of mind over matter, to note how entire nations turned their hopes and hearts towards Fiume and the intrepid figure of its legendary Commander as the sole spiritual flame, that still burned above the world.

Neither was there lacking the inevitable comical note, which always crops up in the midst of greater things: the constant shortage of money in that curious diplomatic corps.

Save for the Irish and Egyptians, nobody had a stiver. The Irish Delegation (at that time not yet independent) had its headquarters at the Grand Hotel and the Egyptian one at the Champs-Élysées. Among all the delegations that were not officially recognised, the latter was undoubtedly the one least assailed by financial preoccupations. It breathed an atmosphere of comfort, almost of luxury.

Its head was Zaghlul Pasha, an old and authoritative Egyptian patriot whose conversation, saturated with occidental culture and oriental craftiness, would have been delightful if he had not been afflicted with the most terrible cough that ever tenanted a human frame. What went on in his bronchial tubes and in his

lungs was indescribable. It was the roar of a factory going full blast, with the addition of the whistling of locomotives and the gear-changing of at least ten lorries all working together.

I never heard anything like it in my life, and none who heard the orchestra can possibly have forgotten it. To make up for this—and it was no small matter—he provided his visitors, apart from the intellectual pleasure of his subtle and captivating conversation, with “Ayala” cigarettes, which, I fancy, must have been specially made for the delegation, so exquisite were they.

But, alas! these were but fortunate exceptions. In all the other Delegations from morning to night there was nothing but talk of exhausted funds, of money lost in transit, of empty safes, and so on, or—an even more refined torture!—reports of fabulous riches on which no one could lay hands.

I shall never forget the episode of the famous diamond *rivière* which tantalised the souls of four of these penniless plenipotentiaries, the number including the author of these memoirs.

A delegate—I cannot remember whether a Syrian, an Armenian, or a Georgian—allowed it to be understood by his companions in misfortune that the secret funds possessed by the delegates of his country included a last resource that was far from despicable. It consisted of a diamond “*rivière*” of an approximate value of two million francs. He intimated, further, that, acting in a spirit of fraternal solidarity, he was willing to allow to those of his colleagues who represented other oppressed nationalities some share of the profit to be obtained by the sale of the jewels.

This comforting and astounding proposal was made to us one evening when we had gathered in the modest room of a shabby house of the Boulevard de Flandres.

It would need the pen of an artist to describe the expression on the faces of the various representatives present at the moment of this declaration. From the deepest and most resigned melancholy they rose to a pinnacle of beatitude, which they tried desperately, but in vain, to hide under a diplomatic mask. One felt that each one was making a mental survey of his personal assets and that before the eyes of each there was opening a glowing horizon for his country and, incidentally, for himself.

But the happy owner of the treasure had, up to that moment, confined himself to generalities. He had not yet informed those

present whether the famous jewels were in his pockets or deposited in a bank. The suspense was becoming unbearable, even agonising, for all present.

To the visible satisfaction of the assembly, I courageously submitted the question which was on the lips and in the hearts of all.

"And have you got the necklace with you, or at home?" I enquired, with a show of nonchalance. Thus questioned, he looked at me with a surprised face. "Oh, non, monsieur," he answered, lowering his voice, as though afraid of divulging a most dangerous secret. "It is hidden at Erzeroum in a cellar."

I leave you to imagine our satisfaction!

* * * * *

As far as I was concerned, if I received no money, I received, by way of compensation, from the *Comandante* (to whom I sent all the interesting news I was able to gather) flaming letters which repaid me a hundredfold for my privations. I have cited examples in a chapter dedicated to Fiume.

Once only, I received from him a brief and disconsolate letter, on the 25th November, 1919.

"I was hoping for the promised news regarding the . . . machinations. Here there is an insufferable stink. I embrace you. "Gabriele."

Some time later, in another letter, he announced to me the arrival of his plenipotentiary, Major Giovanni Giuriati.

Major Giovanni Giuriati, now His Excellency Signor Giuriati, was then, as always, an upright patriot gifted with vivid intelligence, and, moreover (a quality of which people who know him little are unaware), the possessor of a philosophic sense of humour which never abandoned him, even in the most complicated contingencies of life.

No sooner had he alighted from the train at the Gare de Lyon than he gave me a brilliant display of this quality, for as I ran to meet him, he embraced me and said:

"If you hope that I have brought you any money you are wrong; it is one of the many proofs of tenacity of Fiume that we remain so persistently and gloriously poor."

This fatal communication left me undisturbed. It was

already much to be no longer alone and to receive through Giuriati those direct injections of "Fiumanism" which I had long been sorely missing.

We set to work with alacrity with Gino Antoni, former member of the National Council of Fiume, whom, at the wish of the *Comandante*, he had brought with him.

One who was of supreme importance to us, giving us lavishly both friendship and hospitality, was our friend Philippe d'Estailleur Chantereine. It is no concern of mine that, as a Frenchman, he should either then or now range himself with one political group rather than with another, but what I *can* say is that at that time he gave the resources of his heart and mind to the service of the D'Annunzian idea, just as he had given them previously to the support of the Franco-Italian *rapprochement*.

In a few days Giuriati had drafted and placed in the hands of Nitti the official protest of Fiume, setting out its sacred claim.

It is more than likely that His Excellency Signor Nitti, on receiving this document, smiled with indulgent pity. It would have been just like him. They had already bored him to tears with their Fiume! Politics are politics, he probably said to himself, and poetry something totally apart. What, moreover, did the deluded idealists of Fiume hope to attain? Did they fancy that, against his will and the will of the Allies (perfectly in accord with Nitti on the matter); they would annex the city of Fiume for the benefit of Italy?

How much unnecessary vexation and heart-burning had that madman D'Annunzio caused already! And who was this obscure lawyer of Venice, this Signor Giuriati, who in the coolest fashion in the world arrogated to himself the right of debating on equal terms with the Prime Minister of Italy?

Had Francesco Saverio Nitti foreseen that a few years later Fiume would be definitely Italian, D'Annunzio—Prince di Montenovoso, and the obscure lawyer of Venice—President of the Italian Parliament, while he himself was a restless wanderer and an exile from his country: if, I say, Nitti could have cast a glance into the future, he probably would have treated Fiume's representatives with a little more consideration. But the prophets, if they exist, are usually poets and heroes, and certainly not politicians of the stamp of Nitti.

"I have other things to do" (this was the reply he sent us), "than to come and talk about Fiume! Far graver preoccupations at present occupy the mind of the Prime Minister! We need bread for Italy! Bread! That is something different from Fiume, and in two months we shall have none left!"

This "bread question" was one of Francesco Nitti's catch-words; he had insisted so much on this alleged famine that his colleagues, too, went about repeating to everybody: "At the end of the year, Italy will be without bread!"

It was one of those slogans which serve the demagogue's purpose, because, though they leave experts and optimists unmoved, they take formidable hold on the minds of the simple, and among the pessimists who make up the greater part of the population. In the presence of such a spectre, such folk were bound, *volens volens*, to flock around Nitti, though he took up an attitude of exaggerated opposition to all that savoured of idealism, who appeared to them to represent that supreme common sense which at times saves men and nations.

Thus, in accordance with his principles and with his boundless self-esteem, Nitti refused the Delegation of Fiume. The men who composed it could hardly imagine, then, that, in times to come, this contemptuous gesture on Nitti's part would constitute for them one of the highest moral satisfactions to which they could aspire.

* * * * *

After Giuriati's departure I once more took up the ordinary occupations and cares of life, with the single unforgettable exception of a golden rain, which fell on me from heaven, like that which covered Danae; it saved me, quite unexpectedly, at what, if viewed from a financial angle, was a most critical moment.

Unable any longer to pay even my extraordinarily modest rent, and being at my wit's end, I was on the point of giving up my apartment when one day the *portière* of the building in which my office was, accosted me with an expression so different from that to which I had grown used to in the last four months that I was positively compelled to ask the reason.

With the irrepressible smile which her kind keep for moments

when they scent money, she promptly replied: "An Italian officer came to fetch you an hour ago. He is waiting for you at the Claridge's Hotel. It is money that's coming from heaven, monsieur."

I needed no second telling, and hastened to Claridge's, where I had the joy of finding the Legionary and comrade, Aviator Carmignani. He had left Fiume the night before and had flown to Paris during the afternoon, dropping *en route* a proclamation from D'Annunzio to the French. After landing at Issy he had come post-haste to the Rue de Madrid to report at his Embassy. And this time the messenger brought me not only, like Giuriati, encouraging words from the *Comandante* but also a generous cheque on the "Comptoir d'Escompte," which allowed me to settle all my bills, including that of the *portière*, who, when she spoke to me shortly before of "money that was coming from heaven," did not realise that she was being more witty than she supposed.

* * * * *

This was the first time in my life (and let us hope the last!) that circumstances forced on me the precarious rôle of burglar, or, to speak more accurately, of hotel thief.

Although the Italian Delegation to the Peace Conference, which had its headquarters at the Hôtel Edouard VII, was officially opposed to the claims of the City of Fiume and of its heroic *Comandante*, the cause for which D'Annunzio's Legionaries were fighting was, nevertheless, of so exalted and patriotic a nature that numerous enthusiastic sympathisers could be found on the staff of the Delegation, and even in its higher ranks. I found it, therefore, easy enough, on one pretext or another, to pay daily visits to the offices of the Delegation, and even to acquire (thanks to my numerous peace and war-time connections) a sort of right of entry, which gave me a chance to collect all kinds of information likely to be useful to the cause of Fiume.

It was thus that, overhearing one day some chance indiscretion, I learned that a document pregnant with grave possibilities for Fiume had been sent to the Italian Prime Minister by President Wilson.

It was therefore essential for me, by fair means or foul, to get cognisance of and communicate the contents of this document to *Comandante* D'Annunzio, so as to enable him to take the necessary counter-steps.

The precious paper (as I was immediately informed) was kept in one of the rooms occupied by the personal secretariat of His Excellency Signor Nitti. Fortunately, however, a copy had been made, which was to be found in another important office of the Delegation. Unless I was to lose moments precious for the Fiumian cause, I had no choice but to find some way of insinuating myself during the night into this second apartment, obviously more easy of access than the first one. With the complicity of a friend, who concealed me in his room, I found no difficulty in remaining that evening at the headquarters of the Delegation. Like many other Italian officials, my comrade was living in the hotel, and as his rooms were so situated as to allow me to pass unperceived and with comparative ease into the corridor leading to the "treasure chamber," we decided to make the attempt that very night.

Honest folk imagine that it is an extremely difficult and complicated matter to commit malpractice, and that the attempt must inevitably be accompanied by alarums and excursions. I can assert, however, from personal experience, that it is the criminals themselves who do all they can to encourage this belief and to discourage possible competition, inasmuch as my first and only experience of the kind left me the impression that to commit crime is child's play.

My attempt at burglary went off without the smallest fear or even apprehension on my part. Not only was I able to enter quite openly and with the utmost ease the room where reposed the copy of the famous document, but it seemed almost as if my visit had been foreseen and as if the courteous owner had done everything in his power to facilitate my task and save me superfluous investigations or loss of time.

The copy of the document (like the famous letter in Poe's story) was inside the desk, duly filed and provided with all the bureaucratic indications which place the authentic stamp of officialdom on all letters passing through Government offices. Moreover (no doubt, to guide my hesitating hand), there was

attached a slip of paper on which the official had carefully written in blue pencil, as a memorandum for his personal use: "*Secret and confidential. To be submitted to-morrow morning to His Excellency . . .*" (Here followed the name of a high personage of the Delegation.)

I delicately appropriated the document and carried it into my friend's room. We calmly made a typed copy of it, and two hours later, while the hotel was plunged in slumber, it was restored to its original place.

So quiet was it in the office that we felt we could have stayed there undisturbed for half an hour or more, chatting and smoking the excellent cigarettes which lay on the table, without disturbing the solemn peace of the atmosphere.

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Through the usual surreptitious channels the copy of the document left for Fiume the following morning, and some days later I was overjoyed at receiving by the same channels the following letter from the *Comandante*:

"Dear Tom,

"*Last night I received your letter with the 'monstrous' document.*

"*I have no words to express our gratitude to you. You have rendered us a prodigious service, just at the moment when the Government is trying to trap us by the proposal of a modus vivendi which does not offer a single guarantee.*

"*I am about to publish a most important document directed to destroying all the lies and calumnies which are current about us.*

"*I am sending you the text.*

"*We are passing through an acute crisis. I am making all the trouble I can for the command of our adversaries. I take their battalions at my sweet will, and yesterday I captured from the port of Trieste a brand-new destroyer, the Agostino Bertani, under the nose of the authorities! It was a wonderful act of piracy on the high seas.*

"*Four young Frenchmen, with Monsieur d'Estailleur at their head, have come to manifest their solidarity, the worth and sincerity of which I am unable to assess. Even were I to remain alone with my bodyguard, I should still hold fast.*

"B. has informed me of the existence of another secret document, which it would be well for me to see: a treaty with Italy. I am awaiting it. Writing in haste. I embrace you.

"Your Gabriele."

The *Comandante* always bestowed the honorary title of "*Uscocchi*" on those of his Legionaries who captured ships at the point of a revolver, and who, during the occupation of Fiume, carried out feats of legendary prowess, recalling those of the famous "*Beffa di Bucari*," in that the risks of the undertakings were nicely blended with a sense of fun.

On September 12th, 1920, when the first anniversary of the sacred entrance of D'Annunzio's Legionaries into the city was celebrated at Fiume, the *Comandante* conferred on the "*Uscocchi*" the honour of carrying the standard of the Regency of Carnaro in the march past. To commemorate the service I had rendered him in connection with the famous document, he allowed me to figure in this review by the side of his "pirates."

A month later D'Annunzio gave me a new proof of his supreme kindness and his infallible memory by promoting me to a captaincy in the "Fiuman" Legionaries, with the dispatch written entirely in his own hand.

"Lieutenant Tomaso Antongini, for having served the Cause from the first day with sagacity and strength, and for defending and propagating its tenets in France, where he was our representative, is promoted Captain in the Legion of Fiume, as from the first of July, 1920.

"Comandante Gabriele D'Annunzio. Fiume, 30th June, 1920."

This was the only promotion of an officer on record in Fiume during the whole course of the occupation. My modest task was completed, and I could hope for no higher reward.

* * * * *

At the beginning of March the *Comandante* expressed a wish that I should come to Fiume for a short period, which eventually lengthened into one of eight months. I left the representation of Fiume in the hands of my colleague, Lieutenant Count Govone, a "Fiuman" like myself and "*Croix-de-guerre*," upon whom,

from that day, fell the honour and responsibility of that curious embassy.

I was to return to Paris about the middle of November, 1920, but this time in a more official capacity. The Treaty of Rapallo had denied to Italy, the annexation of Fiume, and consecrated, though in strangely truncated form, the rights of the city to her own independence.

I therefore returned to the metropolis, if not in the state of mind of Chateaubriand when sent by Louis XVIII to represent him in London, yet in moral and material conditions very different from those of my first arrival. I passed the frontier no longer like an exile or a conspirator, but provided with the necessary credentials of the Foreign Office of the Regency of Carnaro (such was the name of the new small State which included Fiume) and a diplomatic passport.

This time the quiet Rue Frédéric Bastiat was selected for the headquarters of the Legation. I engaged the necessary personnel and took up my residence officially.

So it came about that when they left their houses on the morning of the 12th November, 1920, the worthy denizens of the elegant eighth *arrondissement* beheld, hanging from a balcony in that aristocratic street, two strange, new, and beautiful flags. The first was red, with a queer design of stars, the other azure, with three lion-heads, still queerer. The latter was the flag of Dalmatia. Several of the leading men of the Italian island of Cherso had come to Paris and asked me to represent their island, whose claims were identical with those of Fiume. But the good Parisians had, in the past few years, seen so many strange sights, and the war had trained them to view with equanimity the most unexpected events! Did not every day bring forth a flowering of the most exotic and unexpected names? Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Armenia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Manchuria? . . . Who could make head or tail of it all?

Moreover, it is a well-known fact that the French know nothing beyond the *départements* of their own country. Did not a humorist once define a Frenchman as a decorated gentleman who eats a great deal of bread and knows no geography?

The appearance of these new emblems therefore made no impression on the popular mind.

The same, however, cannot be said of the *Commissaire* of the district, who furrowed his brow, if only from professional habit. His thoughts must have run somewhat on these lines: "If this flag business is not satisfactorily explained, and above all, if it is not approved of in high places, let us say at the Quai d'Orsay, always so punctilious with regard to form, some busybody will certainly telephone to the Minister of the Interior. Once the matter has gone that far, and the blunder has been committed, the Prefect of Police will hear of it, and in five minutes I shall hear of it, too—and then good-bye to promotion!"

Police inspectors all the world over have always reasoned that way and the police of the 8th *arrondissement* were no exception to the rule, so that the outcome was not long in maturing.

The official representative of the Regency of Carnaro in France, meaning myself, received a few days later an invitation to visit the Quai d'Orsay to discuss a private and personal matter.

Naturally I betook myself there on the day and at the hour fixed for my appointment and a few moments later found myself in the presence of an important official of the Foreign Office.

I shall never forget that man. Icy and reserved in manner, with a monocle in his eye, his baldness disguised by the most ingenious disposition of the few remaining hairs, and with a pale and puffy face, subject to nervous twitchings, he struck me at once as a typical example of the highly placed Civil Servant.

Our conversation was brief but to the point. "If I have summoned you here," he began with the voice of a chorister of the Sistine Chapel, "it is, above all, because your ambassador is tired of the declarations which you broadcast in the newspapers, and which tend to belittle or to throw an unfavourable light on the person of the President of your Council, His Excellency Signor Giolitti."

In the paper *Le Matin* of the 5th January, 1921, after the infelicitous days of the "Christmas of Blood," I took up the accusation which had already been launched in an interview with the editor of that paper, and under the title "*The Delegate of Fiume to France Pleads for D'Annunzio*," I declared: "The apparently inexplicable fury with which the Italian Government has instantly enforced the treaty, not hesitating at an attack in arms on a city Italian in soul and sentiment, and a city whose

independence it had recognised, has a hidden explanation which we reserve to ourselves the right to publish when the time comes.

"When one seeks an explanation of the rigorous instructions given by Monsieur Giolitti it is impossible to shut one's eyes to the personal hate which he felt for the Poet. It goes back a long way. All we need do is to invoke the remembrance of the magnificent campaign waged by D'Annunzio in favour of Italy's entry into the war on the side of the Allies, of Giolitti's opposition, and of that fierce outburst of public opinion which set Rome clamouring for the death of the late President of the Council.

"I assure you that when the truth is known about the Treaty of Rapallo and the aggression against Fiume, a vast uprising of opinion in favour of D'Annunzio will take place throughout the whole of Italy.

"And I beg the French not to forget the historic rôle played by my commanding officer and my friend, and the irresistible persuasion carried by his eloquence in the great days of May, 1915, when Italy entered the arena at their side."

I interrupted him politely: "And who, if it is permitted to ask, is the person whom you describe as *my ambassador*?"

"His Excellency Signor Bonin Longare," answered the official, looking at me with astonishment.

"I greatly regret it," said I; "but obviously we are at cross-purposes. His Excellency Bonin Longare, though very favourably inclined to me, is not at the moment my ambassador. He is the Ambassador of His Majesty the King of Italy, and I am the representative of a different city—small, if you like; young, in so far as seniority is concerned, but having nothing in common with Italy, apart from a certain affinity of race—I am speaking of the Regency of Carnaro, of the existence of which you can hardly be unaware and whose independence has recently been sanctioned by a treaty. If it is solely owing to this circumstance that I have the honour of presenting myself before you, I greatly regret it for the sake of His Excellency Bonin Longare, but I cannot renounce my right to express my views, which are those of the Government I have the honour of representing, in the French press, as I should, I think, be allowed to express them in

regard to the Sultan of Oppia or the Khan of Bokhara, without incurring the wrath of the Quai d'Orsay."

The official dropped his monocle, polished it carefully with his handkerchief, replaced it, then, after a brief pause emphasised by a smile tinged with diabolical irony, he asked me, "Might I enquire with what passport you entered the territory of the Republic?"

"With the diplomatic passport of the Regency of Carnaro," I replied, not without a certain Fiuman pride, "a passport which, if it interests you, I can submit to you whenever you desire."

"And by whom, if it is permitted to ask, is this diplomatic passport viséd?" he asked with a slightly ironical inflection.

"By the French Consul-General in Trieste."

This unexpected retort (the last he expected) seemed not to please the illustrious servant of the Republic; the nervous twitching, which had died down during our conversation, re-appeared more strongly than ever.

Evidently he was thinking, "Up to two minutes ago we were in the middle of an Italian *opéra bouffe*, but now the Quai d'Orsay comes into it. How can our Consul have committed this unforgivable error?" On the other hand, my unruffled calm excluded the hypothesis that I was making a false declaration.

The official could feel that I was actually in possession of a passport completed by the visa, which seemed to play such havoc with his nerves, and knew that it could, therefore, only be a matter of a few moments in a taxi for me to produce it for him.

He meditated for an instant, and then this cutting sentence fell from his bloodless lips: "*He acted very wrongly in giving you his visa.*" This remark was the first that permitted me openly to smile.

"That, I hope you will admit, is no business of mine. If the Consul has made a mistake, it is with him that you must deal. I should be extremely sorry that he should get into trouble on my account, for I assure you that he is a most courteous, agreeable and cultured man. Besides, the French Consulate-General in Trieste has literary traditions: unless I am mistaken, it was once occupied by Stendhal?"

The high personage in front of me became aware that we were

skating on thin ice and that the conversation ran the risk of escaping the arid confines of diplomacy and emerging into a literary and mundane discussion. His prestige was in peril. He rose, offered me his hand, and said, "Nevertheless, I shall be grateful if you will refrain from displaying your flags. The Regency of Carnaro has not yet been recognised by the Government of the Republic."

"Let us hope that the recognition will not be long delayed," I concluded, and took my leave.

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But it was written that the new State—The Regency of Carnaro—like all the political entities which are not based on ethnical or geographical causes, but which merely spring from the arbitrary decision of nations more powerful than themselves, should have but an ephemeral existence.

The *Comandante* D'Annunzio, becoming *de facto* Regent of the new State, refused to demobilise his forces so long as the City of Fiume had not achieved the ends for which he had so long fought and suffered to attain.

There came, therefore, the desperately sad days of fratricidal war, that "Christmas of Blood" which was initiated by the attack on the town by a contingent of regular Italian troops. There was suddenly received in Paris—I cannot say from what source—a wire announcing the tragic news of the death of the *Comandante*. Parisian newspapers asked me to confirm it. I had the audacity categorically to deny it and the good luck to find I had guessed correctly.

But once the Regency had fallen and provisional power had been restored to the National Council of Fiume, the latter, though thanking me officially for all I had done, did not deem it necessary to maintain a legation in Paris. All that was left to me was to return to Italy, which I reached on the 12th January, 1921, in time to receive, in Venice, the great dispossessed Liberator, whom the entire population of Fiume had, a few hours earlier, accompanied to the gates of their city, with all the signs of the most desolated and touching gratitude.

CHAPTER XXVIII

D'ANNUNZIO, KING OF FIUME

A conquest made by a handful of men—The inhabitants of the moon—The "*Timid Chevalier*"—A bunch of grapes—The triumphal march—A fantastic Government—A patriotic steamship—The *Comandante's* charm—The wonderful adventure of Simon Pipiton—Threatening skies—The tragedy—Salute to the Dead.

IMMUNISED from the cowardice, waste and dishonesty which, in that period immediately following the Armistice, which spread over Europe like wildfire, Fiume stood out, for a year and a half, like a lighthouse of purity, like an island of idealism in the middle of a sea of filth.

No one but a poet could have wrought such a miracle, and the fact that the rest of the world has been painfully slow to understand his gesture is only the most convincing proof of the immense spiritual importance of the audacious expedition on which he embarked, for its very grandeur is beyond the comprehension of the average individual.

There is something truly prodigious about the Fiume adventure. A handful of men, inspired and guided by a single heart and a single brain, took a city and occupied it during fifteen long months, and all that in defiance of specific orders and of the formal prohibition of four great nations. And, during those fifteen months the threats of those angry nations were received with an ironic smile by the Poet, who had become a *condottiere*, and with boisterous laughter by the triumphant youths who surrounded their leader.

The city itself, enchanted, and in ecstasy before its conqueror, gave itself to Gabriele D'Annunzio as a passionate woman gives herself to her lover, and lived as contentedly as if it had been assured of the protection of millions of bayonets.

The vulgar but expressive motto, "*Me ne frego*," which was embroidered in gold on the banner which hung over the bed of the Commander of Fiume has never been so faithfully interpreted, because D'Annunzio, both as a leader and as a man, "did not give one solitary damn," and if his expression of his

sentiments was crude, it was certainly as heroic as that famous word which Cambronne employed in the face of the British cannons at Waterloo. It is not my intention to elaborate on the political acts of the Commander of Fiume during that period which D'Annunzio has since described as "*our inimitable life*," for that is the historian's business; I am concerned with showing how the man behaved in the course of his miraculous adventure.

I can safely commence with the statement that all of D'Annunzio's virtues and all of his faults had their place in the general summary of events. Never in all his long life has Gabriele D'Annunzio been more completely himself; never have his talents for creating and fascinating shone more brilliantly; never have the contradictions and incongruities of his mentality had more opportunities of showing themselves.

From start to finish, the adventure bore the stamp of the Poet, and the Legionaries who stood by him so faithfully were little more than heroic characters in the play. Their desires were D'Annunzio's desires; his will was their will; they existed and fought and suffered and died solely for Gabriele D'Annunzio. In him reposed all faith and all hope; nothing counted except the Commander—neither his forsaken native land nor his family nor hatred nor love. Like the Macedonians who followed their divine chief, the Legionaries left every other interest behind them when they entered the gates of Fiume.

For those who did not see Fiume from September, 1919, until the end of 1920, the life of the city was "*inconceivable*," as Galileo said of the inhabitants of the moon.

One day Fiume was visited by a delegation of Italian Members of Parliament. When they had gone I asked D'Annunzio his impression. He replied: "*I believe that I convinced some of them, but I am sure that the majority understood nothing at all.*"

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Since the distant days of his youth, D'Annunzio has always been intensely interested in and occupied with all questions concerning the Adriatic, which he baptized "*the very bitter*," because of the unfortunate defeat of the Italian Navy in the battle of Lissa in 1866.

He has given proofs of his *Adriatic mentality* in a book entitled

Armata d'Italia, and in another, which is a celebrated tragedy, called *La Nave*.

Consequently, it is not surprising that, at the end of the war, he turned his eyes to the Adriatic, and that he refused to consider Italy's vindications completed by the conquest of Trieste and of Istria. The occupation of Fiume was but a logical expression of his point of view.

To insist upon seeing in this, as certain people have tried to do, the isolated decision and the isolated gesture of an eccentric poet is to wrong profoundly Gabriele D'Annunzio, whose actions, exactly like his literary works, have always been linked together, and have been propelled from the beginning by a state of mind pre-existent in him and, sometimes, even unknown to him.

The choice of the moment for the Fiume expedition was determined and even imposed upon him by certain facts, but the idea had taken root in his mind from the instant when he had judged that the Allies had mutilated the victory of Italy in the world war.

Nevertheless, the facts in themselves would not have sufficed to cause the Poet to act on the 12th of September, 1919, if, at the last moment, he had not been confronted by a new element which, if on the one hand a proof of D'Annunzio's hesitant character, is, on the other, a striking example of the determination with which he upholds his sense of what is human and his respect for the lives of his fellow-men.

Few people know of the circumstance which did more than anything else to bring about the immediate execution of the proposed plan. D'Annunzio was informed by one of the future participants in the march on Fiume that the first contingent of officers and men who had pledged themselves to his command had already left the ranks of the Italian Army, with the result that they hourly risked capture and execution as deserters. This tragic possibility, far more than the news of the disembarkation of international troops in the contested city, decided the Poet to fix his departure for Fiume for the morning of September 12th, and that despite his pitiful physical condition (he was running a high fever) which would have confined him to the house under normal conditions.

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D'Annunzio, who is wrongly accused of being a rabid seeker after publicity, rarely alludes—and then only if he is directly questioned on the subject—to the march on Fiume, which constituted the first act of a drama which had for its climax the definite acquisition by Italy of a city of sixty thousand inhabitants, a vast territory and the inviolable frontier of Montenevoso.

Since the return of the *poeta-condottiere* to Italy, he has only consecrated to his glorious achievement a few lines written in his inimitable style. They are to be found in a passage in which he speaks of himself and recalls his life as a "*timid chevalier*" at the time of his sojourn in Rome in 1898.

"After twenty-one years, on a September morning, armed with the arms of fortune but as invincible as his faith, after twenty-one years, this same chevalier gathered his men about him in a meadow belted with ruins and into which there was wafted the breath and the trembling hope of the city which was to be taken, liberated and lifted above the limits of insurrections and human aspirations to the summit of all the free life and all the new life."

"Then, alone against three old Powers staggering with greediness and three old flags flying in boastfulness, he took the city and settled himself within it."

It may be affirmed that the entire conquest of Fiume is pictured in these lines, which are worthy of Tacitus. If the anecdotes and the "atmosphere" had not also their historical value for the centuries to come, it would not be worth the while to add a single word to what D'Annunzio has said so modestly. If he himself has written nothing else on the subject, he likes still less to talk about it. I have heard him recall only one souvenir, and it is:

"At Ronchi, in the house where I awaited feverishly the arrival of the trucks, a peasant woman placed on a chair beside my couch a marvellous bunch of grapes. I did not taste a single one; I contemplated the luscious fruit for a long time; I counted the grapes and I left them."

"Perhaps when I am on my deathbed, an angel will descend from Heaven to offer me that bunch of grapes——"

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The story of D'Annunzio's march on Fiume is too well known in detail to be of any value in this book. I can in a few words explain the essential points. It will be seen that, even on this occasion, D'Annunzio never once lost his instinctive courage and his calculated wisdom.

On the 9th September, 1919, he left Venice by automobile with an officer and an orderly. He arrived at Ronchi, which is about fifteen miles from Fiume, at six in the evening. He slept there in a sort of cabin. At ten o'clock on the following morning he was joined by those officers who had decided to follow him. They were accompanied by three hundred grenadiers.

With this organisation, D'Annunzio set out. Along the road they were met by a long column of Italian soldiers who were solely concerned with returning to their various encampments, and were quite in ignorance of the plans of D'Annunzio and his men. The Legionaries hailed these soldiers and argued with them violently. The latter soon joined the Poet's troops and their officers likewise fell into line.

When they were about seven miles away from Fiume, the majority of the Italian troops, which had remained in the city under the command of General Pittaluga to await the decisions of the Peace Conference in Paris, sought to oppose the march of D'Annunzio and his volunteers.

The General bickered with the Poet and did his utmost to persuade him to relinquish his project. He went so far as to say that if D'Annunzio insisted in his advance he would be obliged to intervene by force. D'Annunzio's reply was very like the one Napoleon made at the lakes of Laffrey:

"General, you have only to give the order to fire on me."

The General looked at his men. There was a murmur in the ranks. The leader's hesitation was interpreted as being an acceptance of the situation. The troops of the regular army cheered D'Annunzio and came over to his side. Evidently there was nothing to be done in the face of a man who was determined to have his own way and who was backed up by a thousand electrified soldiers.

An hour later the city was in their power, and there had been no fighting.

The entire population rushed to welcome the Poet and

frantically demonstrated its gratitude. D'Annunzio was carried in triumph to the Palace of the former governor. And there he settled. From that moment he was the master of the city which he held for fifteen months.

One hundred per cent Italian from the commencement of the undertaking until its tragic and glorious epilogue, as much in his manner of avoiding the traps set for him by his enemies as in laying traps for others, D'Annunzio had no more than assumed command of the city than he was obsessed with the idea of humiliating the pride of the Allies who had forgotten the rights of Italy; and he succeeded because, where even a rebel general or an audacious demagogue would have stopped to weigh the pros and cons, the Poet did not hesitate.

Three hours after the occupation of the city he summoned the commanders of the French and English troops which were still there and ordered them to evacuate Fiume within twenty-four hours.

On the one side were England and France, openly approved in their attitude by the United States; on the other was a handful of heroic fools inspired by the persuasion and the genius of a single man. Such was the situation.

I am convinced that the French and English commands foresaw clearly that, sooner or later, Fiume was destined to become a part of Italy and that this presentiment had far more effect on their subsequent decisions than D'Annunzio's brutal imposition because an English officer, the first British official to be ushered into D'Annunzio's presence, has since said to me, in speaking of the occasion: "You were not many, but you possessed a force which multiplied your number a hundred times over. You had burned the bridges to Life."

This presentiment, coupled with good English common sense, and with the impulsive and irresistible admiration which all Frenchmen have for bold deeds, had the best of the argument, and it was surely most fortunate for everyone concerned. The flags of two great nations, saluted by rifle fire, were borne away, and the military barracks were evacuated, and foreign forces departed for ever from Fiume.

When I asked D'Annunzio how, considering his temperament, he had acquiesced to the demand of the two commanders that

their flags be honoured, he replied with a smile: "*I have always been extremely polite; you know that. It is my weakness!*"

The population of Fiume, the women in particular, showed itself far less chivalrous. Delirious with joy at seeing them depart, the mob accompanied the Franco-English exodus with insults, rotten potatoes and putrid cabbages.

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Once the foreigners had gone, the life of Fiume was organised—if I may use the word—into a patriotic disorder. Happily, we could count on the cohesive element which was inspired by the respect for the military hierarchy. The Legionaries submitted willingly to the discipline maintained by their officers, for they felt that the spirit which animated their leaders was identical to their own. But if a military hierarchy existed and functioned in Fiume under the high command of D'Annunzio, it is equally true that no political or administrative hierarchy of any sort prevailed.

Such an order existed at the outset. For example, there was a "Chief of Cabinet of the Commander" in the person of Giovanni Giuriati, who was actually the Minister of State of the Kingdom of Italy, but the "*amiable confusion*" was such that he had no idea where to start to work. During more than two months, it may be said that the city was governed by three powers: D'Annunzio; the old National Council which had not yet been dissolved; and the Military Command. As for the police, it was never completely "Fiumised": employees of the administration still appeared on the streets in the ancient Hungarian uniform. At the railway station there was another contradiction: the administrative employees had retained their Austrian point of view, whereas the actual railway employees were fervent partisans of D'Annunzio.

Some of the Legionaries wore the tri-coloured insignia in their buttonholes, while others preferred the black decoration of the shock troops. A new tribunal had been instituted; unfortunately, a former cavalry officer presided over it, and he became daily more famous for his comical errors of judgment. The office of Foreign Affairs was directed by a friend of D'Annunzio's, Leon Koschnitzky, a writer of talent and as pro-Italian as possible, but, nevertheless, a Belgian citizen.

If, having pointed out this patriotic confusion, I add that money became scarcer every minute, it will be easy for my readers to imagine to what sacrifices the Legionaries and the citizens were forced to submit to save the entire enterprise from complete failure in its very infancy, and, of course, developments were being carefully watched with eyes of irony by the European Powers which hoped fondly to see D'Annunzio's dream go up in smoke.

Nearly every day the *Comandante* harangued the mob from the balcony of the Palace. The spiritual communion between him, the Legionaries and the people was complete. His words nourished his listeners, who had been starved of hope; they constituted a sort of miraculous sustenance which rendered resistance possible. Thus the life of Fiume became daily more paradoxical and more sublime.

When D'Annunzio's youthful soldiers appeared in tatters in the streets, and laughingly made off with the handkerchiefs or the shirts which the impoverished mothers of families had hung in the sun to dry, the poor women only gazed after them with eyes which were wet with tenderness, and they called them, in their dialect, "the blessed of God."

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I could fill several fat volumes were I to relate the life of Fiume from the month of January, 1920, until October of the same year. But what best characterises this period of enthusiasm was the irresistible attraction which the presence of D'Annunzio in the city had for all the living moral forces which still existed in Italy and which the rapidly weakening Government strove vainly to suppress and to suffocate.

Exactly as in the distant epoch of the Garibaldian epic, parents saw their sons leave home attracted by an appeal which was more imperious than any argument, mental or physical, to restrain them. Patriotic enthusiasm was so strong that it even managed to overthrow the formidable defences of military discipline.

Nightly, regiments, under the leadership of their officers, abandoned their frontier garrisons to rally round the flag of D'Annunzio; ships sailed secretly, attracted by the mirage of the

conquered city; aeroplanes took the air to fly to purer and more "Italian" skies.

"I am holding my own," D'Annunzio, who had sent me on a mission, wrote to me. *"This morning, two generals came to see me. I am receiving entire brigades with their arms and supplies. I am in a position to effect more relentless reprisals. The Government is frightened, and sends me messengers whom I refuse to interview."*

"I do not intend to budge from this spot. The entire world must be convinced of this ineluctable reality."

"I possess twenty-four aeroplanes, the only ones in the Kingdom fit to fly. I know that French public opinion is with me. But what about the politicians? France has an excellent opportunity for a reconciliation with Italy. I beg you to spread all the favourable propaganda you can."

It was not many months before D'Annunzio was compelled to check the arrival of new Legionaries and to close the frontiers of his young State to all these enthusiastic crusaders: the city was unable to provision all those who desired to enter it.

Nitti's Government speculated ignominiously on the situation, and set about starving the city by material privations. Even Red Cross trains were forbidden to circulate. The bread was uneatable.

And yet Fiume had never been so gay in its misery. D'Annunzio said that, apparently, the Goddess of Youth protected it with her wings of flame.

Not only warships but even large steamships altered their course on the high seas to bring merchandise and food to Fiume. There were cases where the captains of ships refused to shirk their duties, but where the crews, won over to the Cause, mutinied and forced the pilots to steer for the distant city which was already legendary.

The *Cogne*, a big steamer carrying thirteen million lire of merchandise, was *en route* for the Far East with an Italian minister, bound for Japan, on board. This boat, having reached the Ægean Sea, suddenly changed its direction and, twelve hours later, on the 2nd of September, 1920, entered the port of Fiume, where it was greeted by salvos from D'Annunzio's cannons and by the acclamations of the crowd.

Other mercantile marine followed the example of the *Cogne*,

with the result that the city was provisioned for several months.

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In Fiume, D'Annunzio, to use another of his expressions, alternated the hardships of war with the elegance of peace: he went to concerts which were given at the Palace, received people who came to see him from every corner of the globe, smiled alike at the compliments and the menaces directed at him and never by any chance did he listen to a suggestion.

In his position of King of Fiume he was what he had always been in his private life: an adorable master. The people and the Legionaries were, in their turn, the best subjects any ruler could have desired. There is nothing strange about that, because everyone in the city saw in D'Annunzio exactly what he wanted to see. The intellectuals saw in him the great artist, the genius of the race, the demigod whom Fate had selected in a moment of national chaos to head a movement of justified revolt and vindication. The officers and the soldiers bowed before that personal valour which he had demonstrated countless times during the war. The monarchists, convinced that his aristocratic principles, proclaimed over and over again in his writings, would prevent him from the slightest republican leaning, blindly accorded him their faith. The republicans looked upon his revolt against the authority of the Italian Government as a certain sign that the political regime was destined for a change. The Socialists saw in the presence of Alceste de Ambris, the famous Italian Socialist who had become D'Annunzio's collaborator, the best proof that the Poet was changing his mind in the direction they desired. The old people felt rejuvenated by D'Annunzio's energetic conduct and the young people adored him as a comrade of their own age.

Everyone somehow saw in D'Annunzio, as if in a mirror, the reflection of his own personal ambitions and convictions.

That is why, during his occupation of Fiume, D'Annunzio was loved by all, and why he had to contend neither with enemies nor with party politics.

In spite of all this, "camarillas" formed clandestinely about him. But the gravest of the intrigues were of the rose-water

variety. Occasionally, certain persons disappeared temporarily from view, but no one in D'Annunzio's circle was ever really in disgrace. The "exiles" considered their misadventure as a sort of vacation period. D'Annunzio continued to see them from time to time, and did not hesitate to complain of the behaviour of their successors!

I want to point out that this chameleon-like changing of colour was not, in D'Annunzio's case, the result of Machiavellian calculations. He simply followed the dictates of his variable temperament. From the beginning to the end of my book, it will be remarked that he has always deceived when he has loved and loved when he has deceived.

To Gabriele D'Annunzio's inconstancy must be added his perpetual hesitations. He has long been widely awake to this fault and has ever been the first to deplore it.

One day he offered me the position of Secretary-General of the Regency. When I had politely refused this flattering but dangerous proposition, he turned smilingly to General Tamajo and to Colonel Sani, who were present, and said: "*He knows me even better than I imagined.*"

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The all but legendary Fiume epoch had, like all similar phases of history, its comic episodes. I class among the best of these the wonderful adventure of which an old seawolf who answered to the rather absurd name of Simon Pipiton was the hero. The adventure itself might well be entitled: "*Legionary in spite of himself.*"

In 1920 Simon Pipiton, a retired sea captain, was living at Benghazi in North Africa. His vast knowledge of the nautical art, acquired over a period of more than forty years, served him for little unless to tell fantastic tales of his former prowess in his favourite cafés in the Arab quarter of the city. He was a good old soul, no more and no less endowed with human intelligence than another, and all he asked was to live the rest of his days in comparative peace and comfort on his modest pension.

But Destiny, without consulting him, suddenly decided that his adventurous life would not be complete without one more act

of brilliance and daring such as to turn pale the faces of those loafers of the Souk who, squatting on the filthy divans of the dives of Benghazi, gaped at his glory from four to seven every afternoon.

An old two-hundred-ton brig was lying in the port. It was called the *Hesperides*, in homage to the ancient name of that city, a mythical name evoked in memory of the famous gardens and the equally famous apples of which Hercules partook.

The merchants of Benghazi, for want of a better vessel, had chartered this old tub to deliver a cargo of sponges, bananas and spices to their associates in Trieste. But if in Benghazi, as in any seaport, there was no dearth of young and old sailors who knew how to manage a ship of such small tonnage and of such little commercial importance, not a single individual had been unearthed who possessed the papers which the law required of a man selected to captain a ship.

When the name of Simon Pipiton was suggested, there were loud guffaws, and it really was impossible to consider him seriously because Simon Pipiton, although officially qualified to command on the high seas, was so old and so stupid as to be utterly useless.

But time passed and the perishable cargo commenced to rot. There was nothing for it but to make Pipiton the nominal captain of the ship, while a capable second officer stood beside him to take the responsibility.

Like the defunct Duke de Medina Sidonia, Simon Pipiton, modest and proud at the same time, at first refused the offer. After years of comfortable inactivity he was no more disposed to go to sea than had been the commander of the Invincible Armada. He pretended that his health left much to be desired, that he was too old, and that he had lost the habit of navigating. But the bait of the promised sum of money proved to be more alluring than all his arguments and he finally accepted. A few days later the brig sailed out of the port of the capital of Cyrenaica amidst the cheers of Pipiton's many friends who had welcomed this event as an occasion for a celebration. Heading for the island of Crete, the good ship soon disappeared on the horizon. The consensus of opinion in Benghazi was that it should arrive in Trieste four or five days later.

But though we know when we leave, we never know when we will arrive at our destination, and the *Hesperides*, two weeks later, was floating up and down the innumerable canals of the Ægean Sea without being able to sight, even in the distance, the canal of Otrante, which, as we all know, is the door to the Adriatic. It is probable that Simon Pipiton, intoxicated by his own importance, had insisted upon commanding the ship, not only officially but in fact. The crew, in no hurry to bring this delightful voyage to an end, allowed him to flounder about to his heart's content.

From time to time the *Hesperides* sighted a sailing vessel and Simon Pipiton, leaning over the rail, his pipe in his mouth, asked for the safest route to follow, because he was terribly frightened of going on the rocks of the Archipelago.

But, despite all the directions received, it was another ten days before the *Hesperides*, guided more by the wind than by the captain, finally nosed into the Otrante. The worst was over; there now remained nothing to do but to head straight north, and the brig was certain to come into Trieste or Venice sooner or later.

On a bright May morning, Simon Pipiton was on the bridge when, through the mist, he spied a mighty mountain which he took to be the Hermada. He figured that the gulf on the right could only be the Gulf of Trieste and he headed for it without hesitation. The only fault in his calculation was that the mountain was the Maggiore and the gulf was the Carnaro. And so it was that Simon Pipiton was deliberately steering for Fiume, and the nest of D'Annunzio's joyous brigands of whose very existence he was in total ignorance.

If we are to understand the rest of this story, it will be necessary to go back a little. The moral condition of the city of Fiume had never been better, but the material condition was desperate. There was not enough to eat for the civilian population and the soldiers, the consequence being that when a ship come on the horizon the hungry mob dashed down to the port to welcome the new-comer and to divest the ship of its cargo, giving in exchange little slips of paper which, for the time being at least, were of a very hypothetical value.

Simon Pipiton arrived under full sail and was greeted like a conqueror, it being taken for granted that he was another Italian patriot who had come to take up the cause of D'Annunzio. He

was accordingly honoured as was befitting a hero who was acting in a purely disinterested fashion.

A delegation of Legionaries immediately boarded the *Hesperides*, and before the brave Pipiton knew what it was all about he was hoisted on to stalwart shoulders and carried in triumph to the Palace. The population, falling in with the spirit of this manifestation, joined noisily in the parade.

When Simon Pipiton strove to make an explanation, it was too late. No one heard what he had to say, for his words were drowned by the applause, and D'Annunzio in person, although he was quite bewildered at the sight of this strange specimen, and could not, for the life of him, conceive of how he had been interested in the patriotic cause of Fiume, kissed him on both cheeks and pinned the commemorative medal of the expedition on his chest.

Simon Pipiton, a hero in spite of himself, spent an unforgettable week in Fiume. He had not the vaguest idea of what had happened to him, and he contented himself with distributing profuse thanks and with emptying countless glasses to the health and glory of D'Annunzio and to the future of the city.

We all know, however, that popularity is as fickle as a woman, and when there was not a banana left on board of the *Hesperides*, Simon Pipiton was politely invited to depart. There was some justice in this, because the captain and his crew threatened to drink and eat more than they had brought with them.

Eight years later I had the pleasure of meeting Simon Pipiton in Benghazi. Happily, he did not recognise me. He had not yet recovered from his adventure in Fiume and the story he told of it was reserved, among all his heroic repertoire, for listeners of importance. For an excellent reason he had made this slight alteration: "Off the island of Cherso, I was hailed by one of D'Annunzio's torpedo-boats. He ordered me to come about. And what was I to do? It would have been folly to resist! But, taking them all in all, they were brave fellows. And D'Annunzio? What a man! I met him on the street two days after my arrival, and he said: '*Hello, Pipiton! You're a hero if ever I saw one!*' And the crowd applauded! And, turning to me, he added: '*Those were the days when men were men! You were too young to understand.*' "

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Unfortunately, the care-free hours between the month of April and the autumn of 1920 were followed by sad weeks and truly tragic days.

The first part of October marked the end of the ever-rising glory of the enterprise. It was at this time that D'Annunzio, in spite of his genius and his prestige, demonstrated his fundamental inability to carry out his programme.

Yet it was a most propitious moment, and his advisers knew it. The patriotic contagion had spread like oil. The *Comandante* could have marched on Trieste and from there, following the traditional road of all invasions, could have headed for the capital.

But he hesitated. November came and he had not yet made up his mind. I asked him to accord me an interview. He replied: *"I have asked everyone to observe this solemn moment which is dedicated to the honour of the dead. You, too, must respect it. I need repose if I am to see clearly into the future."*

The fact is, that Gabriele D'Annunzio, endowed with all the qualities of the animator, has always been totally lacking in those of the executor, and it would seem that, at that moment, he was thinking rather of the fate of Murat than of that of Garibaldi.

Whatever the case and whatever the explanation of his attitude, he arrived at no decision, and, in the meanwhile, his favourable opportunity had escaped him.

Another great leader, two years later, grasped that opportunity which D'Annunzio had scorned and, in another month of October, took to Rome those young eagles which had been nourished in their infancy by the inspiration of Fiume.

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D'Annunzio's conduct during the last phase of the Fiume adventure—that is to say, during those days when, through the fault of Giolitti's ignoble government, the regulars of the Italian Army indulged in fratricide with the Legionaries at the gates of the city—was that of a man overcome more by astonishment than by circumstances.

His first orders were categorical: the city must be defended at all costs.

But when, after five days of unequal combat, he was informed

that he must surrender or see the city, with its helpless population, submitted to a ruthless bombardment, D'Annunzio was unable to throw off his discouragement. His will broke before the realisation that his dream could not come true, and that Italy had failed to understand him. He expressed his horror at the useless sacrifice in words of disdain and execration: *"Three well-chosen days of silence"* (the Christmas holidays) *"have covered the murder. On the fourth day the murderer will be glorified. O, old Italy, keep for yourself your old man who is worthy of you. We are of another country, and we believe in heroes."*

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Destiny has bestowed upon Gabriele D'Annunzio in a unique lifetime as many emotions as are contained in a hundred ordinary existences. We all know that and it is hard for us to forgive him because each and every one of us has, in the bottom of his heart, an inextinguishable thirst for adventures and for dreams, and we instinctively resent it when we see another human being who is more amply provided than are we.

But, in the midst of so many emotions of every kind and description, among the innumerable instants when D'Annunzio's life has touched the highest summits of human sensibility, I do not believe that there is to be found a moment as pathetic as when he saluted his Dead before leaving that City to which he had sacrificed fifteen months of patient waiting and of sacrifice.

High up in the City of Fiume, in a vast and solitary hollow, like an immense votive cup raised to Heaven, there lies the cemetery.

Preceded by the Bishop of Fiume, followed by his Legionaries and the entire population, the *Comandante* went to this cemetery on the morning of the 2nd January to salute, for the last time, those soldiers who had fallen during those bloody days.

Because I did not have the good fortune to be by his side during those days of glory and of martyrdom, I am in ignorance as to whether the procession took that strange road which leads from the old quarter of Fiume and mounts by stone steps to the mountain which tops the city. But I like to suppose that it did, for the road is known as the "Way to Calvary," and, certainly, never more than on this occasion has the predestined name had

so complete and so striking a significance.

Covered with laurels, thirty-three coffins were ranged in the alley of the cemetery. Ten contained the bodies of soldiers of the regular army and twenty-three those of the Legionaries who had fallen in the defence of Fiume. The word "defence" sounds false and seems to take on a sad irony when we consider that those who defended the city only did so to offer it to their country, and those who attacked it only did so to prevent the sublime offer, repeated countless times during more than two years of atrocious suffering, from being accepted!

I am convinced that, if the *Comandante's* great heart did not break at the sight of these coffins, it was because it contained a breath of love stronger and more incorruptible than life itself.

Destiny had reserved for this magnanimous man, for this irreproachable heart, this final and terrible test: that of being forced to see Italians, inexplicably blind, destroy, before his very eyes, his great and unique dream which was to crown finally the far too often mutilated victory of his adored country.

He spoke not one word of bitterness or of condemnation. He said:

"If He who meditates beside the tomb of Lazarus, if the Son of God were to appear now between the altar and the coffins, between the holy table and the sacred labarum, between the burning candles and the extinguished lives; if He were to appear here and if He were to evoke and resuscitate those dead soldiers, I believe that they would only rise to weep, to pardon one another and to throw themselves into each other's arms."

D'Annunzio did not speak for long, and when he had finished, he knelt down. The Legionaries and the people, all in tears, followed his example. Then, at the head of his silent troops, he went back down to the city.

In the deserted cemetery a few women remained and they approached the coffins to take little sprigs of laurel. Then they, too, went away. They were the same women who, a few years before, in their mad love for their native land, daily risking death—for the Austrians never pardoned in such cases—had secreted in their homes the Italian prisoners and had shared with them their wretched fare.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE VITTORIALE

An exiled Sovereign—The Council of the Marshals—The Poet's unfriendly intentions—The modest country house—The garden of the ten thousand rose-trees—The lawyer who loved poetry—D'Annunzio papers the walls—The "Room of the Leper"—The wonderful music-room—The musical ghost of Liszt—The bath-room of the Prince of Montenevoso—The room of pure dreams—The Caudine Forks—The Island of Elba—The Escorial of the Poet

SINCE the intellectual world has decided that Gabriele D'Annunzio has been unable during the whole of his life to do a single thing that was not tainted with swaggering and theatrical self-advertisement, it can do no harm to describe the august simplicity with which he achieved the difficult transition from the state of Sovereign to that of mere citizen, a transition unmarked by the stain of ridicule exhibited by other ex-royalties, although devoid neither of spirit nor of common sense.

Having left Fiume on the 18th January, 1921, under a deluge of flowers, forcing his way through the crowds of a city in tears (I affirm the latter, for it is an historical fact which was witnessed by twelve thousand people), he arrived at nightfall by car at San Giuliano, a small port of the Venetian lagoon, facing Venice, where he was awaited in a motor launch by the ex-commander of a Fiume destroyer, Lieutenant Manzutto, and myself.

Apart from we two, the mole was deserted; the lagoon, the small port, the house of the harbour-master, the road leading to it, were shrouded in that dim mist which often envelops Venice during the winter months.

Wrapped up in his grey pelisse, his head swathed in a fur motor cap, D'Annunzio on his first appearance gave me the impression of a suddenly aged and tired man, almost in a trance. He embraced us and then, without uttering a word, went aboard. A quarter of an hour later, we reached the flight of steps leading to the Palazzo Barbarigo, commonly known as Barbarigo delle Terrazze, where D'Annunzio, a short time before the conquest of Fiume, had rented a vast apartment on the first

floor and had accumulated furniture, books, ornaments—all glorious remains of the wreck of Arcachon and of the Chalet Saint-Dominique, abandoned by him for ever in June, 1913, and left uninhabited for over seven years.

This apartment, which appeared to him in the light of a vast depository rather than of an actual residence, provided him at that moment with the much needed solace of helping him over the acute contrast between his previous life as a Sovereign and that of a simple artist, which he was about to resume.

The sight of this queerly assorted collection was nevertheless a distressing one, and for us, his companions, it was further aggravated by the equatorial heat customary to all D'Annunzio's homes and brought to boiling point as a compliment to the longed-for return of an adored master by Aelis, the faithful guardian of the untenanted home, who had remained in Venice during the whole of the Fiume expedition.

On the day following his arrival D'Annunzio, losing no time, called, for the afternoon, a council of the "marshals" of his ephemeral empire. There were six of us.

We found the *Comandante* thoroughly exasperated, in a state of high nervous tension, distressed beyond words by the incredible disorder which reigned in the apartment. He roamed through the rooms, with apparent aimlessness, his glance resting with melancholy now on the broken edge of a table, now on a half-open box, which erupted bundles of documents and letters, and then, on piles of dusty carpets heaped in a corner. It was a spectacle sufficient to irritate and depress him to the utmost degree.

He briefly informed us that numerous villas and palaces had been proposed to him by admirers and agents for his future residence in Italy. He eliminated Sicily and the whole of the South *a priori*, and ordered us to go and search in other regions for an abode which we might consider suitable for his requirements.

He assigned to my other comrades the Lakes of Como and Maggiore, the Italian Riviera and the Bologna region, and to me Lago di Garda, giving us identical instructions. He concluded, in a voice between the tragic and the jocose: "*If within eight days, none of you have found a suitable house for me, I shall throw myself into the canal, since I have no intention of camping any longer in this Venetian mausoleum.*"

After having dismissed the others, he signalled to me to remain and said: "*I have given you Lago di Garda because I feel that my Fate impels me to live there. You alone know my tastes, my vices and my virtues; the others see in me only the Comandante of Fiume, but luckily, the tastes of the Comandante of Fiume are not those of Gabriele D'Annunzio.*"

But apart from this, the Poet's predilection for Lago di Garda had long been a matter of common knowledge. Moreover, as far back as 1909 popular opinion had risen in Italy against the "Germanisation" of Garda. The alarm had been given by Federzoni (later President of the Italian Senate), who at the time was fervently studying art and literature. And D'Annunzio had immediately ranged himself on the side of those who wished to preserve the Italian character of the Lake, which he used to call "*the lake of Dante and Virgil,*" advocating with his usual thoroughness the drowning of all foreigners in the Lake—quite obviously, a radical solution of the problem.

Twelve years later, being definitely installed on Lago di Garda, the Poet once more took the lead in his campaign for the "italianisation" of the Garda and sent a memorandum to the Minister of Commerce Bellotti, in answer to which the latter wired as follows: "Grateful for your noble words and animated by the same spirit, I shall do justice to the Italian soul of the Garda, convinced that the best omen for this work is to put at the head of it your name, O our immortal Poet!"

On the evening of the day on which he entrusted me with this errand, I reached Lago di Garda, and set out with alacrity to discover a new home for my "lord and master," who, as I was leaving, had furnished me with a short list, written entirely in his own hand, in which he enumerated the indispensable requisites for his future residence.

Here they are:

A garage for two cars—stables for at least three horses—a good concert grand—a bath-room—a laundry and pantry—heating—suitable arrangements for procuring, "*at a moment's notice,*" wood and coals—an "enclosed" garden with gratings—at least four servants' rooms.

* * * * *

Concerning the origins of the *Vittoriale* so much gossip has been spread by simpletons and imbeciles, so many idle stories and legends have been circulated by D'Annunzio's admirers and ill-wishers alternatively, that the authentic origin of the henceforth historical D'Annunzian habitation deserves to be related in full, the more so as it is bound to gain in interest as the years go by.

The only proposal relating to a likely villa on the Garda had reached D'Annunzio in a series of courteous letters from the Editor of the *Corriere della Sera*, the then all-powerful Luigi Albertini, the most unlikely man to understand the soul of the *Comandante*; in fact, the living antithesis of every taste, wish, love or inclination of Gabriele D'Annunzio.

The villa referred to was called "Alba," a sort of Germano-bourgeois parody of the Parthenon, which I ruled out without even going to see it.

I was shown the Villa Zanardelli, which in the eyes of the local population, perhaps out of respect for the illustrious statesman, was considered their *non plus ultra* show-place.

I needed only one glance at the terrifying drawing-room, on whose ceiling a native painter, with the aberration of taste common to the Humbertian era, had depicted the most famous political heroes of the Italian Renaissance, either in uniform or frock-coat presiding over a sort of constitutional Olympus. Anyone will realise the powerful stimulus which D'Annunzio would have derived for his future activities from the contemplation of Benedetto Cairoli's rubicund countenance or of the spectral physiognomy of General Lamarmora, exhibited on the ceiling of that preposterous room and reminiscent of the wax figures of the Musée Grévin.

A few months later D'Annunzio, who was already living on the Garda and whose curiosity had been aroused by my description, expressed the wish to inspect the famous frescoes in person. He spent an hour of exquisite enjoyment at the Villa Zanardelli, assuring the gardener, who showed him round, that he had never seen anything to compete with these frescoes, except those of the Orcagna in the Cemetery of Pisa.

Finally, after a week searching in vain during which I conscientiously explored the shores of Lake Garda and its surround-

ings without finding anything even remotely suitable, I was offered a villa, an ex-German property, at that moment under sequestration, called "Cargnacco," hidden away amidst cypresses and beech-trees and situated on the lowest slopes of the hill overlooking Gardone di Riviera. I went to visit it without any particular enthusiasm, for experience had taught me that whereas first impressions often lead to quick results, no such luck attends the last. Yet in this case it was the reverse that happened.

In a small rustic square, overshadowed by a dense cupola of trees with a tinkling fountain in its centre, there arose before my eyes the entrance to a modest and simple country house instead of the pompous façade and imposing flight of steps of a villa, which I had expected. To the right of the small entrance gate, a grating buried in foliage gave a glimpse of the garden. I requested permission to visit it, noticing, as I did so, that on the stone arch which surmounted the entrance were written the words: "SOMNII EXPLANATIO."

This strange axiom appeared to me as a happy omen (precisely because it was incomprehensible to me) when applied to a house and a garden that were to house D'Annunzio. As I have related elsewhere, he has always showed a marked predilection for all inexplicable and obscure sayings.

But this inscription no longer exists, for D'Annunzio had it erased after a fall from his window on the 13th August, 1922—a mysterious episode to which I shall refer later.

One day I asked D'Annunzio whether there was any correlation between this tragic event and the disappearance of those curious words. D'Annunzio, who never acted without a reason, showed some inclination to satisfy my curiosity, but then withdrew into his shell and, shrugging his shoulders, replied with his enigmatic smile: "*There are more things in heaven and earth . . .*" And on that day, at least, I could get nothing more out of him.

The garden of Cargnacco seemed ideal for a poet. It was even then full of azaleas, violets, carnations and freezias, and though the countless roses which now confer such celebrity upon it had not unfolded their petals yet from the wealth of buds which the gardeners pointed out to me I could visualise in advance the

marvellous display which they would present later.

Delighted with this floral opulence, which for D'Annunzio was not only a pleasure but a real necessity, I at last entered the house. In the entrance hall of the ground floor there was not much furniture, but all of it in good taste. I also noticed a concert grand in one corner of the room. The custodian of the villa, who had taken over the functions of guide from the gardener, said to me in tones of religious awe: "This piano belonged to Signor Liszt; it was presented to our first mistress, who, as you may know, was a daughter of Signora Cosima Wagner."

"All this is promising," I said to myself jubilantly, and proceeded with my inspection.

The second room, of an elongated shape, was literally lined with books from floor to ceiling. I put their number at 3,000 at least. "Better and better," I thought. "And how many rooms are there in all?" I asked.

"Counting both floors," the man answered, "there are some fifteen, but there are also many interior staircases and corridors. It is not a modern house. It is only fair that the Signore should know this."

I did not wait to hear any more, and wired at once my first impression to the *Comandante*. On the following day I returned to Venice, where I found a gathering of the "messengers." The least successful had come back with an offer of a palace standing in grounds of 100 acres, with turrets, colonnades, and artificial grottoes complete.

My description of the villa of the Garda made to D'Annunzio in the presence of my comrades who had returned from their peregrinations laden with such cumbersome riches, coming on top of their proposals, was received in an impartial spirit by the interested party and with commiserating smiles by my Fiume companions.

How was it possible, they thought, that their god and idol, the Sovereign of the Carnaro, should be content to inhabit a small and simple country house such as described by Anton-gini?

I desire to point out, in fairness to them, that, given the prevalence of a militaristic spirit in their make-up, the details

concerning Liszt's piano (whom they probably mistook for some pianoforte-maker of lesser fame than Erard, Pleyel, Ricordi and Finzi), or my reference to the library and its three thousand volumes, must have left them quite cold.

When I came to the end of my recital, the *Comandante* pondered for a moment; then in a voice which was as calm as it was imperious and speaking to me as though no one else existed: "*If the house is as you describe it,*" he decided, "*I shall take Cargnacco. We shall visit Garda to-morrow.*"

This is how the new Capponcina, fated to become one day the famous *Vittoriale*, was selected.

If, in mentioning Cargnacco, I evoke the ancient and famous residences of the Poet on the hills of Fiesole, it is because, in reality, the points of analogy between the two houses are both numerous and peculiar. They were both country houses, although at the same time also real villas: they were both built on the slopes of the hills and at about the same altitude.

Each had an Italian garden and a terrace filled with roses—had small rooms and were rich in staircases, hidden nooks and recesses.

They presented an extremely modern appearance and were completely hidden from the sight of passers-by. The only considerable difference between them lay in the fact that while the "Capponcina" was exclusively the house of an artist and a creator, the *Vittoriale*, of which I shall have more to say further on, did not rest content with such a small objective, but became in time the temple of a hero.

Ancient patina-covered vases from Persia could be seen cheek by jowl with the poniard of an *ardito* of Fiume who died fighting. The small paunchy Buddha stood on guard over the screw of the airship of Da Pinedo, who flew the Atlantic; a rusted unexploded grenade postured between delicate amphoræ full of rare perfume. In the garden the glorious prow of the ship *Puglia* overhung the cypresses and rose-bushes with its fateful bulk.

But the same atmosphere reigned, and the inevitable cushions, which from 300 had grown into 500, were here too with all their softness, variety and richness, silent and constant accomplices of their master; they, like all the other objects, would

certainly have been able, if gifted with vocal powers, to tell the same graceless anecdotes to the sceptics and to the bourgeois which their predecessors at the Capponcina might have told.

No sooner had D'Annunzio set foot in the villa of Cargnacco, walked through two or three of its rooms and opened a window into the garden than his decision was made. Too many elements—precisely those, perhaps, which would have put off other people—combined to render the house attractive in his eyes.

From the first moment when D'Annunzio visited a house his mind was busy, almost subconsciously, planning alterations: in his imagination he was pulling down doors, widening windows, heightening walls, building on new rooms, and already visualising the probable aspect of his new home.

It is my opinion that even on the first day the name of the Vittoriale, still inexistent at that time, must have slumbered in his subconscious mind.

The tangible result of the colloquy which he held with himself was that, one hour after the visit, he requested me to take at once all the needful steps to acquire the house, recommending me to do all I could to obtain as long a lease as possible.

The legal custodian of the villa "Cargnacco" (which, as I have already stated, was held under sequestration by the Government) was an old notary of Brescia, Doctor Ubertoni.

He asked me 1,000 lire per month, but when he heard that the villa was for D'Annunzio, he lowered his demands to 600. I learned subsequently that his adored nephew had been a Legionary of Fiume—a rare case indeed, that of a lawyer ready to capitulate before the stronger ties of family affection.

In speaking of the persecutions which Dame Legend has inflicted on D'Annunzio all his life, I have mentioned previously the pathetic little story (which has been both told and written) of the so-called violent spoliation of Signora Thode, owner of the villa by that arch-villain and plunderer, Gabriele D'Annunzio. I do not, therefore, linger over this comic and unsubstantiated version, but take the opportunity of disposing of another paltry and malevolent invention.

The custodian of the villa lived in two small rooms adjoining

the house, and D'Annunzio found, as soon as he had settled in, that he needed one of them.

In return for this ejection, he offered, through my intervention, a compensation that was, at least, twenty times larger than any that would normally be offered in such a case. But even so, not satisfied with his own liberality, he rented for the custodian's family a small, self-contained house some twenty yards distant, and larger and more spacious than the former one. The custodian showed himself extremely grateful, but the consequences of this kind and munificent gesture were not long in materialising.

That considerable portion of the population which spends its days in the cafés and moulds public opinion, hastened to declare that Gabriele D'Annunzio, acting in conformity with his usual selfishness, had found this easy means of destroying the humble hearth of an honest family, because his hyper-aristocratic person was unable to tolerate its proximity.

Although, as I have already said, the project of a future and more grandiose residence had already sowed its seeds in D'Annunzio's phantasy from the first days of his stay at Cargnacco, yet for several months he was solely concerned in rendering his abode more comfortable and adding to it, if only provisionally, various improvements and embellishments. He paid frequent visits to Milan, returning laden with the most various assortment of objects and materials.

He was constantly wiring me instructions to try and send him things; and though his telegrams breathed a spirit of kindliness, they might, from the variety of their demands, have emanated from Robinson Crusoe.

"Please get me a parcel from Vogue. Please ask Corbella for six pairs horse blankets wool and six pairs linen. Please bring dead green leaf varnish. Please bring me twenty thousand lire. Gabriele."

He decorated the rooms, designed additions to his present accommodation, installed new and powerful stoves, and prepared guest-rooms for hypothetical visitors, never dreaming that one of them would be Benito Mussolini.

He wrote to me about two bedrooms: *"The two bedrooms are a veritable vacuum of horror."*

He jestingly christened his villa "La Canonica," judging the

name "Cargnacco" too harsh and war-like. "*This retreat of mine is rustic,*" he wrote in 1923 to the Duca del Mare. "*Tired of stupendous palaces and sumptuous villas I have come here to shut up my sobriety and my music-gladdened peace in this old colonial house, not so much to humiliate myself as to put my powers of creating and renovating to the severest test.*"

Perhaps also, remembering past events and the hundreds of thousands of lire spend in pandering to a craze for embellishing his numerous residences during half a century, he meditated upon the expediency of limiting himself to the most necessary improvements and keeping even these within strict limits.

The "Vittoriale" was actually only born on the day following the legal and effective sale of the "Cargnacco" to D'Annunzio. He wrote to me at that time: "*The house is being transformed. Its peace is perfect. We must protect it.*"

* * * * *

I am convinced that if visitors to the Vittoriale had the opportunity of expressing their opinion, an overwhelming majority would declare that their first impression on crossing the threshold of the *Comandante's* famous residence is one of physical suffocation and moral discomfort, difficult either to analyse or describe.

Once they have passed the entrance gates, whereon is written "*Clausura Silentium,*" they are faced by a short staircase whose narrowness is enhanced by a column of man's height, placed in the centre of the short lobby which overhangs it. From there the way leads through a corridor on the right to the main apartment, and on the left to an isolated room called by the Poet "The Adriatic Oratory."

The first remark made by anyone who penetrates into the fastnesses of the incredible Vittoriale is that all the rooms, considered from the point of size, are nothing but rabbit-hutches, being no more than sixty feet square; three rooms only in the Vittoriale—the Poet's library where he works, the music-room and the library—are rather more spacious, though none is more than a hundred and twenty square feet.

For the restricted area one can hardly blame D'Annunzio, who, having found the house built on these lines, was incapable,

for all his inventive genius, of extending the walls without, in the first place, knocking them down. The trouble is that the D'Annunzian decoration accentuates to such a degree the feeling of oppression, of "air hunger," of lack of light, and the impression of ornamental exaggeration, that the visitor—the visitor, I repeat, whose judgment remains unimpaired by favourable prejudice—can no longer determine whether he is in the house of the greatest poet of our times, of the flier over Vienna, of the complete and authentic hero of the Hellenic conception, or in the apartment of a crotchety old lady with a passion for collecting objects of every sort and description.

In every room the accumulation of the most dissimilar articles, of beautifully bound books, of the most extravagant *bibelots*, of the rarest materials, of the most extravagant cushions, can be described by one adjective only: oppressive. D'Annunzio was aware of this congestion, so much so that he once jestingly said to me: "*I am building a bar against the time when I shall be receiving visits from war comrades, who cannot move within the crabbed space of the Vittoriale among things that might drop or break.*"

"*There will be gilt niches for every bottle and the room will have walls of polychrome marble.*"

I can predict even now that I shall be accused of irreverence. However, I do not care. The word "irreverent" cannot apply to my judgment—always objective and serene—of a man whom I have, in spite of his weaknesses and his faults, always considered (especially when everyone slanders or undervalues him) so supremely great that he moves me like the sight of some masterpiece every time I see him. To apply such an epithet to me would be both unjust and unmerited. Sincerity can never be irreverent, although sometimes it is hard to bear.

To return to the decorations and the furniture belonging to the Vittoriale. What matter, say I, that the propeller which decorates a ceiling should be that of the aeroplane with which Da Pinedo has flown twenty thousand miles; that the material which drapes a cast of Michelangelo should have been presented by Kemal Pasha; that a volume of the library should have belonged to Napoleon, whose death-mask was also in D'Annunzio's possession; that the pianoforte in the music-room

should have been that of Liszt, when all these objects are not so much distributed with exquisite art and taste as herded together, making each room look like the annexe of a museum or of an art-shop?

It is true that this consistent phantasmagoric evocation of past glories, of formidable names, of heroic actions, personified, nay, revived in every object, in every piece of drapery, in every statue, in every symbol, provokes in the visitor a state of mind in which he is swayed between admiration and piety; and these, in their turn, perturb and deflect his judgment.

Added to all this is the presence of the *Comandante*, a living embodiment of every relic, endowing each with an unreal life, through the inimitable and suggestive potency of his words, the richness and unexpected originality of his imagery, through the immediate and improvised creation of an atmosphere drenched in passion and glory, annihilating even in the most steady minds every velleity of free and dispassionate criticism.

To those who enter it, the Vittoriale is the cave of Aladdin, the *Thousand and One Nights*. A few hours after leaving it, the visitors seem to wake from, who shall say what dream, and nine visitors out of ten are incapable of describing anything they have actually seen. All the descriptions which have been made of the Vittoriale up to now are fatally influenced by that state of mind from which no one is able to escape.

Henry Bordeaux, the French Academician, in one of his recent books, after trying to describe the "indescribable" Vittoriale, says: "When I leave this villa, only comparable to a fairy tale, and its magician with his eyes sparkling with youth, malice, intelligence and ardour, I am dazzled."

If I am able to discourse in a different tone, if I am able to take a different view, it is not that I am more intelligent than others, or possess a more acute sensitiveness, but solely because the decades which I have spent in the shadow of D'Annunzio have, unfortunately, lessened for me the magic suggestion, the almost hypnotic seduction of his words and of all that surrounds him.

Let us examine for a moment, with a serene and quiet mind, one of the most famous rooms of the Vittoriale, the "Room of Death," also called the "Room of the Leper."

It is a small room, having an area of perhaps forty square feet, or even less. This detail is important. A bier occupies the middle of the room, with a mask at the head of what might have been the corpse. As on the tomb of Gaston de Foix, a sword lies diagonally across what, in this case, is the imagined body. Beautifully coloured glass gives passage to a mystic and diffuse light, reminiscent of the interior of a cathedral. At the foot of the bier, stands a coffin containing earth from Casala, that cemetery of Fiume where are buried the dead of the "Christmas of Blood"; but around the empty bier, there is an accumulation of strange and varied objects, ornaments and symbols, which destroy its solemnity and spoil it irremediably. The visitor cannot be certain whether the Chamber of Death is an underground burial-place or the embodiment of the conception of a great artist, half maddened by drugs.

This feeling is deepened by the decorations of the ante-room, a minute space panelled in seventeenth-century wood, with a multitude of cupboards in which D'Annunzio keeps, under lock and key (you will never guess!) . . . veils, sashes, cosmetics, to be presented to his women guests. And this not three yards from the bier!

The first religious feeling (for what is there in the world more inclined to create religious feeling than to recall death?) is naturally destroyed. It recoils before a complex feeling, composed in the beginning of severe respect, but followed and replaced by successively joyous and libertine impressions, neither to be excused nor explained away, which superimpose themselves upon it.

I am unable to understand why D'Annunzio does not feel these contrasts, which are as irreverent as they are intolerable. This aspect will remain an eternal mystery to me, the more so, as this effect is caused by the material arrangement of a number of things, of which he might have easily disposed otherwise, for it is perfectly easy to avoid placing side by side a crucifix and a programme of the Folies Bergère.

A visitor to the Vittoriale has summed up in the following manner the D'Annunzian contradictions:

"How can the riches and the opulence of the house adjust themselves to the lines and the spaciousness of the architectural

elements? How can warlike heroism concord with ironical or satirical symbolism? How can faith in saints go hand in hand with solicitude for Oriental idols? How can one who has celebrated the 'Imperial four-in-hand: Will, Voluptuousness, Pride, Instinct,' adapt himself to the meaning expressed by the austere statue of St. Francis? How can a sensual atmosphere and a lack of prejudice blend with purifying austerity and the spirit of self-renunciation?"

The answer is extremely difficult.

But this is not all. In the narrow corridor which, apart from linking up the two rooms, gives access to the Chamber of Death, on one of the doors there hangs an engraving of a decidedly obscene character. I cannot place the original; it must belong to the Flemish school, or that of Goya; certainly to the sixteenth century.

Exhibiting it to me, D'Annunzio complacently told me how he had once received the visit of a high dignitary of the Church who asked him the reason why he kept that monstrous picture in that particular place. "*I answered,*" said D'Annunzio, "*that, since the corridor formed the link between my bedroom and that of a possible feminine visitor to the Vittoriale, I had hung up this repulsive presentation to kill any desire or temptation.*"

It is more than likely that the whole episode is the fruit of his imagination. It helps, however, to lift a corner of that mysterious veil which always enveloped D'Annunzio's psychology.

When D'Annunzio showed the bier, he pointed to a mark made in the centre of it, explaining thus the reason: "*I wish my left ear to be deposited here; it must be cut off by one of my Legionaries the moment I shall have died. I make all the Legionaries who come to see me swear that they will obey my orders.*" For what reason? The only explanation is that D'Annunzio, as he often repeats, considers that the ears are the most perfect part of the body.

* * * * *

In the Vittoriale there is one wonderful room—the music-room. I have seen even extremely stupid people struck by it, which is a proof in its favour, because next to the clever man, the greatest sceptic is the stupid one, who is never amazed at anything.

It would be easy to enumerate the contents of this room, but it is almost impossible to give a correct idea of them. Everything—lighting, colouring, materials, marbles, the way the furniture is arranged, the decorations on the ceiling—everything is harmonious.

The installation was wholly due to D'Annunzio's inventive genius, and to his poetical *raptus*, and it is as beautiful, pure, imaginative as his finest literary masterpieces.

The Poet said to my daughter, who remained rapt in ecstasy on the threshold, so greatly was she struck by all this beauty and harmony: "*You are the only person who has realised that I am a better decorator and upholsterer than I am a poet or novelist.*"

And still harping on this stupefied admiration on my daughter's part, he wrote to my wife a few days later: "*We have spent hours of friendship over a few frescoes, always regretting your absence. You will find Nerina, on her return, 'straightened out' and fatter by seven ounces. She will tell you how I am: a craftsman dabbling more than ever in every art.*"

Whoever crosses the threshold enters an unreal kingdom, and when some artist is seated at the piano, this sensation of unreality becomes even greater.

In this room D'Annunzio's inspiration as a decorator reaches its maximum perfection. He is conscious of it, and when the visitor sets foot within the music-room for the first time D'Annunzio always lags behind with a placid smile, discounting in advance with complacency the inevitable and fatal shock.

A curious picture of Alessandro de' Medici by Guercino, so affirms the Poet, hangs in this room and, for some unknown reason, D'Annunzio keeps it veiled during recitals.

A new music-room has been added to the first one, in the place of the former dining-room of the Villa di Cargnacco. The latter had become vacant after the construction of a new wing of the Vittoriale which includes the new dining-room, entirely blood-red and with walls lacquered in the same colour.

In this new music-room D'Annunzio has reunited the countless Buddhas dispersed in the rooms of the Vittoriale and grouped them on an altar in the shape of a pyramid, drawing his inspiration from certain Burmese temples. But this shrine to music is far less suggestive and accomplished than its

predecessor, perhaps because the number of objects cluttering it produced an even more disquieting and unpleasant impression on the visitor than the former. The Poet ordered a new piano for it in 1926, and having received it, wrote jokingly to its maker:

"My dear comrade in construction! Yesterday at vespers there arrived your sonorous piano, imprisoned in the profundity of its fir planking . . . it suddenly began to vibrate. . . . The Vittoriale is a place of mysteries and miracles. Not without tremor did I become aware that the shade of Franz Liszt, who for a time inhabited this house, had hastened to approach, and passing his slender immaterial hands across the keys was extracting from the strings a sort of rhythmic tempest that soared towards the first stars. . . . This admirable Hungarian abbé played for me in the far-off days of my youth on a moonlit night at the Villa D'Este, and at the mere memory I can feel my heart beating as then. . . .

"This mask seems to look at me from the severe walls of my office, where I work twice 'eight hours' and often three times 'eight hours' from day to day, perhaps beyond life, and perhaps beyond death . . . Et ultra."

Apart from the Oratory, the two rooms dedicated to music, the new dining-room, the library (the only one which remained more or less as I found it on entering for the first time the Villa di Cagnacco), the small corridors completely lined with books, the "Leper's Room" (or Chamber of Death), a small dressing-room for the use of visitors and the servants' offices, the Vittoriale only contains the small apartment of D'Annunzio and a top floor for the use of expected as well as unexpected visitors.

Thus, apart from the addition of a small wing, of the arches and colonnades of a scenographic style (it is impossible to qualify it otherwise) with which the architect Maroni solved, whether for good or ill, the decorative scheme of the entrance to the Vittoriale, it remains, if regarded from the point of view of the number and size of its available rooms, a mere country house.

Let us throw a rapid glance at the Poet's private apartment which is on the first floor, on the level of the actual dining-room.

The first impression that assails one on entering it is the same that one experiences in Versailles upon penetrating into the

apartments of Marie Antoinette, Queen of France—that is, of a want of space beyond all expectation.

The first small room was, according to D'Annunzio's intentions, to have been a small private dining-room. And it is in this room that the Poet actually takes his meals, when he does not make use of the large dining-hall on the second floor (used only rarely when visitors are present) or when he is not content to have a tray served in his study with some cold meat, a cup of tea and biscuits.

Next to this is his bedroom, a room of elongated shape but also of restricted proportions, and almost entirely taken up by a large, low bed.

Perhaps this is the least encumbered room of the whole Vittoriale. At first all it contained in the way of ornament was a Greek statue representing a feminine nude, which stood close to his bed.

As I did not see it there one day I asked what had become of it.

"I have had to remove it," he said, "because one night, during a light earthquake tremor, it nearly fell on my head. I was just able to ward it off with my arm. One should never have women in one's vicinity at night . . . at least not a marble one."

Thence one reaches another rectangular room, a small museum of war and peace trophies containing so many precious things that their catalogue will some day certainly fill entire tomes devoted to description and enumeration, but most certainly not compiled by me.

A small covered verandah which gives on to the garden communicates with this room. It also served as a small complementary museum in which D'Annunzio never sets foot unless to accompany some visitor, and the rectangular room mentioned in the first place, likewise embellished with the inevitable divan piled with cushions (never absent from *any* room of *any* apartment inhabited by D'Annunzio), leads into the bath-room.

For my personal enjoyment and in order to watch the expression on the faces of artists and pseudo-artists of the world, of D'Annunzio's devotees in the two hemispheres, of women who have read *Piacere* and the *Contemplazione della Morte*, of

æsthetes and millionaires, I would like to be present when they are first admitted into the room which provided for the innumerable ablutions of the waster of millions, the conqueror of cities and women, the most *raffine* artist of this century and the last. I am certain that they expect, on the most modest hypothesis, to find at least a sunken bath of polychrome marble, surrounded by colonnades and *tepidaria* and illumined by huge windows of coloured glass. And on seeing the real thing, I feel sure that they gaze at each other startled and dismayed, hardly trusting their sight, as though faced by some indescribable anachronism.

In fact, D'Annunzio's bath-room at the Vittoriale, save for some dozen genuine Persian antique tiles framed in black ebony, which hang on the walls, merely for decorative purposes, was neither more nor less than a bath-room which might be found in any small hotel in a second-rate provincial town; containing a bath (not even a marble one!) of moderate size, and, bolted to the floor, another toilet accessory which I shall pass over in silence to avoid shocking my British readers.

This concludes my description of the private apartments of Gabriele D'Annunzio, Prince of Montenevoso.

The second floor of the house, more difficult of access—for D'Annunzio only allows friends or specially favoured visitors to enter it—is composed of:

(a) A minute room called the "*Room of the Stump*," whose walls are decorated with endlessly repeated representations of an open and truncated hand, the symbolic significances of which become easy to interpret when one hears from D'Annunzio himself that it is destined to hold the archives of his correspondence, nine-tenths of which, at least, remains untouched.

The task of reading and indexing the letters which have accumulated there would be no surprise or pleasure for me, because, as I mentioned earlier, for many years I lacerated my fingers tearing up tens of thousands of letters, from known and unknown admirers of the Poet all over the world; but this occupation may present some interest in time to come for investigators of D'Annunzio's temperament, or, more broadly speaking, for the students of psychology in general.

(b) Next to the "*Room of the Stump*," and preceded by two or three steps, is the work-room or the office, as D'Annunzio calls

it, where the Poet does all his writing. It is the one room sacred and inviolate, where no one, not even the most beautiful woman, the best-beloved, the most adored one (admitting that she exists) may remain longer than five minutes, if D'Annunzio is in one of his working moods. Under this room D'Annunzio has been obliged to place iron supports because of the weight of the books. "*The Vittoriale dances and crumbles, and I have no wish to descend into the music-room head foremost while I am writing,*" he said to me. When entering this spiritual fastness, D'Annunzio himself, though of short stature, is obliged to bend down, so small is the space between the steps and the ceiling of the little passage which gives entrance to the study.

Once, in sheer absent-mindedness, D'Annunzio injured his head quite badly by bringing it suddenly into contact with a corner of the ceiling.

It would have been easy to remedy this defect, which is merely due to faulty construction, but D'Annunzio refuses to do so, for it pleases him to think that the entrance to his sanctum, also called the "Room of Pure Dreams," should always be a sort of "Caudine Forks" for others as it is a trap for himself. Anatole France, when leaving the Paris house where he was to live to the day of his death—the Villa Saïd in the Bois de Boulogne—found a precisely similar constructional anomaly in a small sitting-room leading to his bedroom; and like D'Annunzio, and perhaps for the same reason, he refused to have it altered.

In that fairly large room which is situated above the music-room, on the first floor, and the key of which never leaves D'Annunzio's possession, he does his writing, seated at an old oak table, flanked on both sides by similar tables, and stacked with hundreds of letters, books, pamphlets and clean sheets of paper, as well as with others covered with his handwriting.

(c) Going down a side passage one reaches the "Guest Chambers," consisting of two bedrooms, two dressing-rooms and a small dining-room.

The appellation "Guest" is a vague one in D'Annunzio's household and applies as well to transitory guests as to those who stay on indefinitely, at the Poet's invitation. By the way, it is very rare for male visitors to stay at the Vittoriale—so rare, in fact, that the only exception I can recall is Benito Mussolini.

D'Annunzio has bought and furnished a small villa outside the confines of the Vittoriale called Villa degli Ospiti, in which he receives his rare guests.

(d) There remains on the second floor and in a wing of modern construction the large red lacquer dining-room, which I have already mentioned.

Just as the exterior decoration and the newly constructed wing added by D'Annunzio modified the aspect of the old forerunner, the Villa di Cargnacco, so did the garden profit by the changes and improvements wrought by its new master, to say nothing of the ten thousand rose-trees which imparted an entirely new atmosphere to it.

D'Annunzio often recalls with an air of ostentatious sadness the immense expenditure incurred by him to embellish his residence, and one day he said to me: "*Someone offered me 50,000 lire for the columns which were to serve for the venerable fabric of the Vittoriale, but*"—and he smiled maliciously—"he wished to become a senator."

During these last years, D'Annunzio has desired that his roses should flower and die without being interfered with. He gave up his old habit, so dear to him at the Capponcina, of filling the house with selected blooms. "*I do not want any more dead flowers around me,*" he said in answer to my comment on the absence of flowers in the rooms of the Vittoriale.

There are two surprising and unexpected features for the visitor in these gardens.

The first is a small enclosure encircled by stone benches, which looks as though it were to serve for some Druidic ceremony; it is adorned with votive columns covered with mottoes and legends, and records the twenty-seven victories of the war. There is a column dedicated to the Irish Free State bearing the Gallic inscription "EIREANN ABU."

In the arena, the heart centre of the Vittoriale, the sacred enclosure to which one gains access through a small stone arch, on whose façade is written "*Rosam cape, spinas cave,*" is where D'Annunzio, surrounded by his devotees, carries out his ceremonies and patriotic celebrations. The ceremonies more often take place at night illuminated by torches.

The second surprise for the visitor consists in the glimpse

accorded him of the large and solemn prow of the ship *Puglia*, which is sunk into the slope of the hill and reminds one of a battleship, miraculously protruding from the earth among the tree-tops, like a phantom craft. It is the gigantic prow of the destroyer *Puglia* on which, in July, 1920, while the ship was still anchored in the Yugoslav port of Spalato, the fury of the assassin Croats there murdered the courageous commander, Tommaso Galli.

The Poet desired that this gigantic war-relic, consecrated by sacrifice, should find its last resting-place at the Vittoriale, and the Fascist Government at once acceded to his request.

In this way the Lago di Garda, which, in A.D. 1400, thanks to the audacity of Bartolommeo Colleoni, *condottiere* of Venice, had seen the miraculous apparition of the Venetian galleons, sees for the second time and thanks to the will of no less famous a *condottiere* a modern warship look down upon it from the heights of a hill.

High up, at the end of the park, there is the "Hill of the Dead," where are buried Fiume's heroes and where D'Annunzio himself has expressed the desire to be buried under a stone which will bear the epitaph, "HINC RESURRECTURUS PRO PATRIA."

As the reader will have realised, my intention in this chapter on the Vittoriale has been to note the various and successive moral and spiritual impressions rather than the material and visible ones. For the latter, I refer them to the photographs that will be published some day, the catalogues and the Baedekers, more illuminating than any description. It is really neither my wish nor my aim to show that which will some day be a national museum, solely inhabited by the overpowering memory of a genius, in the place of the master who, alive, is a very human being, a blend of virtues and vices, of incredible contrasts and inexplicable whims, of which he himself is either unaware or of which he refused any explanation.

This, perhaps, is the true reason why, in his wish even to exclude every elucidation of the strange enigma presented by his life, he has caused to be erased the words which were written at the top of his last and superb dwelling-place: "SOMNI EXPLANATIO."

Unlike many great and small artists, for whom a house—when their means allow them to acquire one—only represents the outer symbol for ostentatiously displaying their riches (in proof of which I can cite Edmond Rostand and Maurice Maeterlinck), D'Annunzio has always been an "assiduous inhabitant" of his successive homes.

But D'Annunzio's desperate love of isolation has reached its peak at the Vittoriale, where he re-lives his heroic dreams, perhaps because it no longer represents a house, a villa or a castle, but a veritable domain, in which he enjoys a sort of spiritual extra-territorialism, which does not need legal sanction to be something effective and real.

Since D'Annunzio's residence on the Garda, the Cargnacco's original name has been transformed into that of the Vittoriale, and it has become a sort of small principality guarded and protected by a detachment representative of the armed forces of Italy, as one protects a monument erected to the Motherland's glory.

* * * * *

Many have directed their steps towards the Vittoriale, the Mecca of Intellectualism, but few have penetrated inside, and often among those refused admission have been the very best, inspired by a pure ardour of enthusiasm, but who have had to content themselves with a mere glimpse of the fabulous dwelling-place through a gap in the belt of trees and the scenographic stones erected by the architect Moroni.

"There lives D'Annunzio!" the good bourgeois and the town people say to their sons; and the young men, and especially the young women, who have never seen him, create in their imagination a sort of fantastic Blue Prince, immortal like Legend or Poetry.

The Poet with the name out of a fairy tale, "Prince of Montenevoso," has hardly ever crossed the threshold of his last residence where he is outliving his fame. He has no wish to mingle with the outside world.

His long and adventurous journey through life has come to an end: he has attained his object.

Many of those who, in 1922, opposed Fascism have been

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nourishing for many years the secret hope that D'Annunzio is hostile to the new regime in Italy and that the Vittoriale in some way represents his "Island of Elba," instead of which it is his Escorial.

CHAPTER XXX

ON THE THRESHOLD OF IMMORTALITY

It was in January, 1936, that D'Annunzio appeared to me, for the first time, like a man on the threshold of death. Such was my impression when, after a year of absence, I found myself in his presence.

His custom has always been to come forward to greet his guests rather than to sit back and wait until they are ushered in by a servant.

With rare exceptions, the friend or the ordinary visitor is shown into a waiting-room. In the Vittoriale, D'Annunzio calls this room the Adriatic Oratory; in the Capponcina it was the Refectory; at Arcachon it had no name, and was simply a large room giving on the sea.

The Poet has the habit of separating these waiting-rooms from other rooms with heavy draperies. After a few minutes of meditation and curious anticipation which are likely to be prolonged to a quarter of an hour, and which permit the visitor to admire a quantity of objects of occult or of evident symbolism and to read the thousands of phrases sculptured on the walls, carved in the woodwork and embroidered on the silks, he suddenly hears light, quick footsteps, softened by the rugs.

If he is ignorant of the ways of D'Annunzio, the visitor supposes it to be the servant come to take him to the master. Instead, he sees before him the Poet in person, and he is greeted, according to circumstances, with a firm handshake or an affectionate embrace.

There are several reasons for this old custom of D'Annunzio's. In the first place, he makes a religion of hospitality; in the second, he is courteous in the extreme; in the third, he has the conviction that this modest gesture, touching closely on the intimate, cannot fail to charm the visitor who is already a warm admirer.

But on that night in January, 1936, Gabriele D'Annunzio did not come to greet me. Capable, after all these years, of distinguishing his step from a thousand others, I was not mistaken by that of the servant who held aside the drapery and asked me to follow him into the private apartment where the Poet was waiting for me. It was then, for the first time in the forty-five years that I have known him, that I experienced a feeling akin to pity.

The man who rose up when I drew back the curtain and who came forward toward me was not the man I had seen the previous January.

Truly, it seemed to me that he had aged by thirty years.

There stood before me a man completely disfigured by time, the sad spectre of the D'Annunzio I had always known.

So greatly was I shocked that, fearing that he might read my thoughts, I rushed to him to embrace him.

Only his expression and his voice remained the same. Everything else about him revealed an almost unbelievable physical retrogression.

Numerous panegyrists, to whom he has accorded brief interviews of late, describe him—probably in an effort to express their gratitude—in their newspaper articles as having the appearance of a man of thirty, and they attribute to him the gift of eternal youth.

Unhappily, I, who have known him for so long, cannot honestly deny the truth.

The physical appearance of Gabriele D'Annunzio, which, until 1930, had not changed perceptibly, has undergone, in the course of the last four years, a veritable transformation. This is particularly noticeable in his face, which is ravaged beyond description. His very features have been deformed by a diabolical hand.

I am tempted to say that D'Annunzio's face has no age and that, were it necessary to give it one, I would be forced to evoke the awe-inspiring visages of centenarians which already seem to bear the marks of mystery.

His body, on the whole, is somewhat better preserved, but, even there, I noticed a general decline, a sort of shrivelling up.

The stoop of the right shoulder has become far more pro-

nounced. His movements have lost that suppleness and harmony which they possessed a few years back. I perceived something forced in the nervous activity of his head and hands, in his way of turning, in his manner of leaning forward, although he endeavoured to convince me that he had retained his former juvenility and exuberance.

If his voice is still clear and sonorous, it is the emission which is no longer certain.

Those gestures, with which he has always accompanied and emphasised his words, are not nearly as spontaneous and as impressive as they were. Frequently, in fact, I took them for those of an exhausted man, and, at other times, for those of someone who has just been aroused from a deep sleep and has not yet gained entire control of his movements.

Only then did I thoroughly appreciate the awful truth of the following letter which he had sent me on my arrival a few days before and which I had received a quarter of an hour before the New Year:

"My dear Tom,

"Welcome to you! I am not at all well, but I am not suffering from any commonplace malady. I am suffering from shameful old age, and also from the Christmas of Childhood, the Christmas of Blood and the Christmas of Misery.

"I believe that I am dead as was the Chevalier Bayard at the assault of Brescia. You remember his words:

" 'I can no more, for I am dead.'

"The anniversary will be in February, a little before my 'march,' ever so funereal for me.

"Forgive me. For six days, I have seen no one—not even a servant. And I am disgusted by the enormous quantity of victuals which are arriving from all directions and which are accumulating, like so many flowers, around the coffin of some colossal Gargantua.

"Naïve people are celebrating, this night, one of our diurnal and nocturnal deaths.

" 'The city is won!' said the bleeding Bayard. 'Life is lost!' says his weary emulator.

"I agree with you: our interview will be not only useful, but most interesting. Please pardon my long and inexcusable silence. It is

impossible to explain my senile enigmas. They have nothing of the Sphinx. I embrace you. Your

"Gabriele."

These were not then, as I had hoped in my affection for him, merely the amusing reflections of a sceptical and disillusioned man. (In 1913 he wrote to me jokingly: "*Dear Tom, I am growing old. Life is hard when the feet are tender.*") No, this time he had expressed a real despair, an intimate desolation, a vague presentiment of the end, if not of life, at least of everything that had been his reason for living, the *vivendi causa* of the Latin poet. It was the sad knell of which all the agonising reality lay in the unsparing words: "I can no more, for I am dead."

My eyes now saw him exactly as he had seen himself when he had written to me.

Once again, judging himself, he had judged correctly.

* * * * *

D'Annunzio spoke. His voice, as I have already stated, has conserved its agreeable ring, its persuasive intonation, its warm sonority. It is still the voice of the conqueror of women, of men and of cities.

But whereas before, although he has always loved to talk, he was sometimes a good listener, it appears that, now, he finds no pleasure unless in listening to himself. He is quite capable of talking steadily for two or three solid hours, according himself short pauses during which he will permit, without enthusiasm, his interlocutor to say a few words. He continually asks questions to which he does not await an answer. His volubility, ever great, is now astounding. He flits from one subject to another, changes his mind in the course of the conversation, complains bitterly of an existent circumstance or of the manner in which someone has treated him, and, five minutes afterwards, finds the identical circumstance quite natural and the same person quite justified. His harsh words and his scowl have been replaced by kind words and an indulgent smile. He outlines fantastic projects which could not be realised in a normal lifetime and, a few moments later, with equal conviction and the

utmost seriousness, he announces the absolute certainty of his death within the month.

In reality, he considers that he is still an actor only in two branches of life: art and love. It must not be forgotten that, like Victor Hugo in this as well as in many other respects, at seventy this formidable man has not renounced love.

Naturally, I would not dream, by means of disrespectful investigation, of seeking to find out just how far this cult of love is carried, but this much is certain: D'Annunzio's favourite topic of conversation continues to be "women." Not only can he discuss "women" indefinitely but, for the last three years, he has written on no other subject.

The smallest cafés on the Lago di Garda buzz with stories of the recent loves of Gabriele D'Annunzio. Just as cabarets and brothels prospered at the foot of the column of the stylite martyrs, so, in the shadow of the Vittoriale, does the tree of scandal flourish.

The thousands of pages on which, day by day, he has been noting fragmentary thoughts, verses and epigrams, deal almost exclusively with physical love and feminine beauty.

Tortured by his memories, troubled by irresistible desires, exasperated by the evidences of his old age which he qualifies as shameful merely because it comes between his constant desire and the object of his passion, the Poet continues to sing of women and of love as he has understood and worshipped them both—in a fashion distinctly pagan.

If I have created the impression that he writes of nothing else, allow me to correct myself. He does, but far more seldom and at lesser length. Some day, when all his manuscripts will have been read and classified, my statement will be corroborated.

* * * * *

Although D'Annunzio maintains the contrary, I do not believe that he is capable, at the time of writing, of producing a work at once organic and of appreciable length; not that he lacks for a moment either the creative genius or the inspiration, but that he no longer possesses the force, that amazing force which formerly enabled him to bend over a manuscript ten, fifteen and even twenty hours out of twenty-four.

When one has the great good fortune of listening to him as he follows, with his words, his imagination to which he never accords a moment's rest, and which ceaselessly renews his dreams, one asks oneself, in utter stupefaction, how, in the brain of a man past seventy, such marvellous images can still germinate. Such visions! Such prodigious inventions! And, alas, they are destined to be strewn about in great disorder or to be entirely forgotten. For no one, and least of all D'Annunzio, could note them properly on paper. Posterity will find, in all the documents he will leave behind him, but a small portion of his colossal literary creations. But they will serve as proofs of the virtual existence of elusive masterpieces, gone from the world with the Poet.

* * * * *

During these last years—I speak of the period from 1930 to 1936—D'Annunzio's temperament has also profoundly modified; although he retains a large measure of kindness, patience and condescension, nevertheless, one frequently remarks a sort of bitterness, a general discontent and an inexplicable animosity towards everybody and everything. Brusquely and for no apparent cause, his mood changes; he abandons himself to violent philippics, to unjustified lamentations and even to absolutely unfounded accusations.

One gets the impression that he considers himself as misunderstood, as forgotten, when, actually, the vast majority of Italians, and the Chief of the Government at their head, are continually trying to do the impossible to gratify his most inordinate desires.

Usually, this frame of mind is caused by his everlasting need for money. He is always short—of course, by his own fault, for he continues to spend right and left without ever stopping to count.

One cannot suppress a smile when one knows that, having received three or four hundred thousand lire destined to pay the contractors and the workmen at the Vittoriale, he calmly takes thirty thousand lire from the amount and sends them to his friend the carver Brozzi, to whom he owes over a hundred thousand lire, along with this note: "*And so I am sending you thirty thousand lire on account: the fruit of a coup de main.*"

Yet who, without having first seen the figures, could believe that the following, addressed to me on the 12th January, 1933, contained a word of truth: *"Perhaps you do not know that the donator of cities and of frontiers is in such a wretched financial state to-day that he has not been able to meet even the smallest of the bills received at the end of the year"?*

* * * * *

But the actual tragedy of D'Annunzio is his too poignant realisation of his physical decline. His entire being revolts against this inevitable fact, which he watches in its gradual aggravation with as much horror as if he were concerned with some monstrous, cruel and undeserved disaster.

I have already quoted a letter in which he attributes his incoherence, his impatience and his unreasonable reactions to old age. It has become the leitmotiv of all his letters and of all his effusions. A few weeks after I had received the first communication, I received a second in which he praised my "affectionate patience"—(this is his expression)—which I, according to him, displayed in waiting until he felt disposed to grant me an interview.

"Your friendship," he wrote, *"is so old and so faithful that I am confident that you will forgive me."*

"For several days I thought that you had wearied of waiting and had gone away. So many days go by when I fail to open a letter, a telegram or even a newspaper. I am deep in one of those sombre periods of melancholy in which you have seen me before. But old age renders them more unbearably cruel."

* * * * *

In the last three years it may be said that D'Annunzio has only received willingly either those people who have never met him before or those who have occasion to be with him frequently.

His old acquaintances who have not seen him for some time, and particularly women, are not among the preferred of his visitors.

The fear of reading on their faces an expression of astonishment or of compassion is so great as to cause him, now and then, to be impolite, to make him put off as long as possible a meeting

which has been promised and arranged well in advance, and when circumstances make it impossible for him to completely dodge the encounter, he suffers terribly as if from a grievous humiliation.

It happens that he alluded to one such interview in the course of a conversation with me. He did it with such pitiless sincerity that I was dumbfounded.

We had been talking at length about old friends, and he had asked me questions about various people, principally women whom he had not seen for ages.

I chanced to remark: "Even with your prodigious imagination, I feel sure that you can have no idea how that woman's face has changed. And she was so beautiful!"

"*I think you are mistaken,*" he told me, "*because, only a month ago, I had a similar experience which was one of the greatest disillusionings of my entire life. Never, in my maddest dreams, had I conceived that beauty could be so ravaged.*

"*It was when I saw Elena Muti.*

"*She came to the Vittoriale with a young relative.*

"*At first, I failed utterly to recognise her. Why! she has even lost her own eyes, I tell you! And she had such marvellous eyes. Now she is a pathetic little old woman. She has changed so that I was unable to evoke her face even in my memory—I felt terribly sorry for her. But,*" he added, "*I think she pitied me as much as I pitied her, for she stopped short on the threshold as if something had frightened her.*

"*I walked across the room to greet her. I took both her hands in mine. We sat down side by side, without saying a single word.*"

And after a brief silence he concluded:

"*We wept together.*"

* * * *

Thus did D'Annunzio speak to me one day in January, 1936. The following day—the 14th of the month, to be exact—as he wrote a letter on my behalf to Mussolini, he began as follows:

"*My dear Comrade,*

"*Since the solemn day of your vibrant speech to the Senate, the tombs of my dead on the Mastio and the prow of the ship Puglia are crowned with laurel which blooms again and again and with oak*

THE LIFE OF D'ANNUNZIO

which is drying. Seeing-blindman that I am, I know the propitious hour for each and every rash deed.

"Why do you not commission me, without compromising the Chigi Palace, to attempt the next to last adventure?"

"Let me die!"

This was, perhaps, his first genuine appeal to Death.

* * * * *

Alas! The day will come when the flags of Italy and Fiume will fly at half-mast on the Vittoriale.

On that day, the intellectual value of humanity will suffer no great loss because the formidable light which D'Annunzio has nurtured and disseminated throughout half a century of stupendous creations will continue to shine as brilliantly as before.

But a man—made of flesh and blood and bone like all of us, steeled by a fierce desire to live, to act, to create and to drink deep of earthly joys, a man richer than any of us in vices and in virtues, insatiable in his desires, totally ignorant of cowardice or fear, disdainful of vainglory, the friend of the poor and the weak—will disappear for ever from our midst.

If I have contributed—as I profoundly hope I have—towards determining for posterity the authentic conspectus of this remarkable man, of this extraordinary and multiform specimen of humanity, then my effort will not have gone for naught.

And now let us close the book on the mysterious words with which D'Annunzio has sought to describe himself and which he has caused to be engraved in the most obscure retreat of the Vittoriale:

EGO SUM GABRIELE QUI ADSTO ANTE DEOS
ALITIBUS DE FRATRIBUS UNUS OCULEUS
POSTVORTAE ALUMNUS ARCANI DIVINI
MINISTER HUMANAЕ DEMENTIAE SEQUESTER
VOLUCER DEMISSUS AB ALTO PRINCEPS ET PRAECO.

I AM GABRIELE WHO PRESENT MYSELF TO THE GODS WITH THE
KEENEST EYES AMONG MY WINGED BROTHERS STUDENTS OF
POSTVERTA—MINISTER OF THE DIVINE MYSTERIES—INTERPRETER
OF HUMAN FOLLY—FLYING MAN FALLEN FROM ON HIGH—PRINCE
AND HERALD.

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